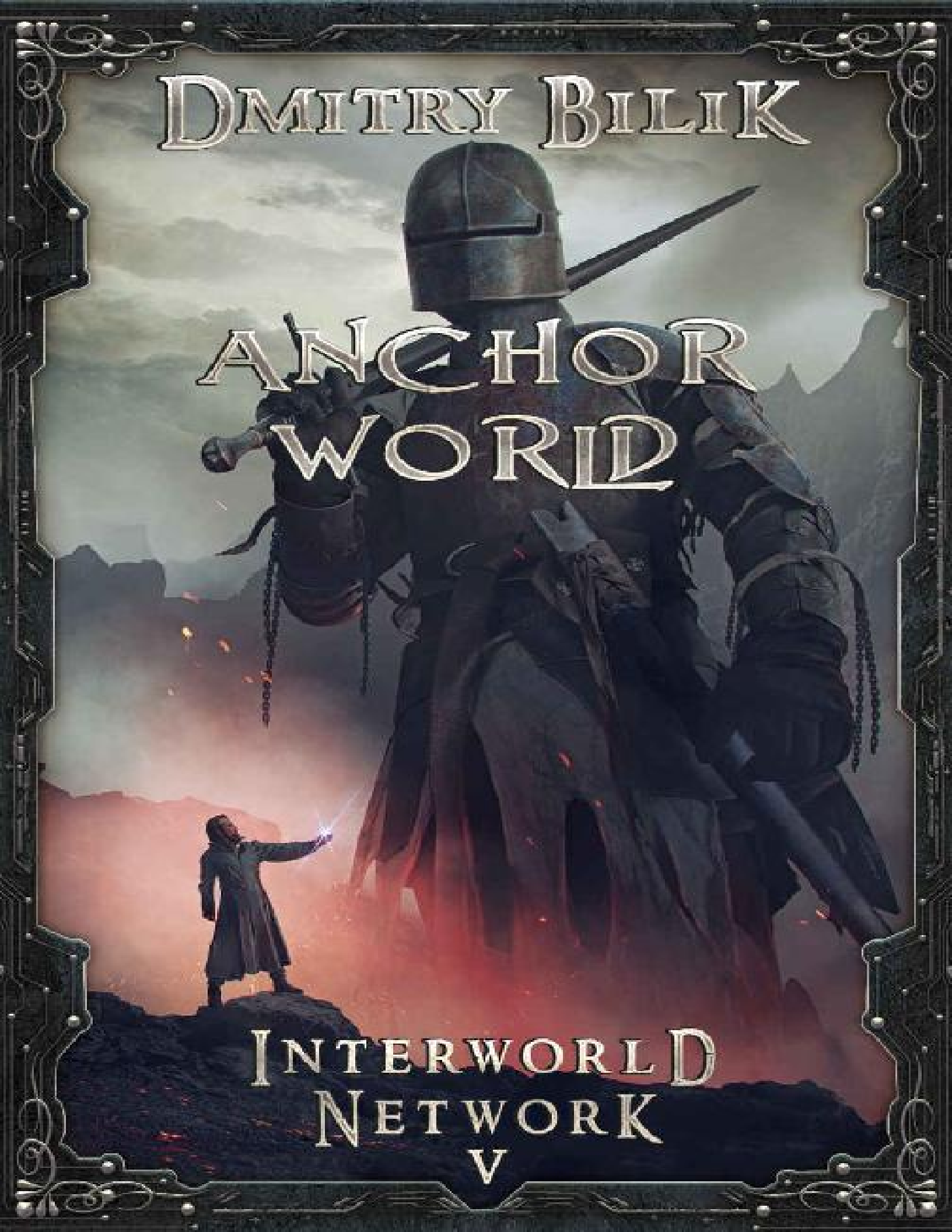
Dmitry Bilik

Anchor World



Interworld Network V

Anchor World

a novel
by Dmitry Bilik

Interworld Network
Book#5

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Chapter 1

WHEN YOU EMBARK on a long journey, you don't start by getting the biggest suitcase or by stuffing your pockets silly with cash. You start with an intention. A firm, adamant desire to either blaze your own trail in life — or at least to wander off your current one.

I had a funny feeling that every Player had to go through this stage at some point. And now it was my turn.

If the truth were known, I should have taken my departure seriously. After all, I was leaving this world for good now. My home world... I really should have given some last-minute advice to my sister and had a word with my great-grandpa regarding the arrival of a new Player to our household. I should have asked Pa to keep an eye on all the others, too.

Plus, I still had to work out what to do with Bumpkin. Lots of things to do, provided I was a regular guy with plenty of time on my hands.

Unfortunately, time was an issue. I had exactly eight days until my karma switched back to its original reading. So I either had to somehow max out my Light karma in the few days I had, or reach the Choruls before it was reset. Somehow I tended toward the latter.

So that's how it happened that Arts and I only had a couple of hours before lunch to finalize our earthly affairs. At three p.m. local time we were meeting at the local branch of Players Bank in order to sort out our cash issues. That done, we were taking the tried and tested route via Purgator and Atrain to Noggle toward the Central Worlds, seeing as I was a persona non

grata in both Elysium and Mechilos now. In theory, of course, I should be safe as long as I stayed inside their respective Gatehouses — but somehow I had little desire to test theory with practice.

Which was why Arts and I had parted ways for a few hours to wrap up a few things. Don't know about her but in my case, things seemed to be getting easier but more difficult at the same time. One thing I couldn't take with me was my apartment — and I definitely didn't have the time to sell it now, either. Wonder how long it might take the bailiffs to arrive at my abandoned, rundown place burdened with a bunch of unpaid utility bills? Would the authorities have it sealed? What would the local Commoners think? Would they start searching for Serge Demidov as a missing person? Whatever. I really didn't care.

I didn't have much to pack. The only things I really needed were what I already had — either on me or in my inventory. The only big problem was Bumpkin. My faithful, destructive Bumpkin.

"Boris, hi, man," I tousled my little neighbor's disheveled hair under his cocked fur hat. Then I asked him the question every adult feels obliged to ask a child, "How are things at school?"

"Okay," Boris wheezed, staring down into his half-unzipped winter jacket. "I might finish this term without any Cs if I try real hard."

"What have you got in there?" I asked.

"A kitten. Found him by the basement. He's freezing. But Mom will never let me have him. She says she doesn't want fleas in the house. Think you could take him?"

"I wish I knew what to do with my own," I said. "He's a huge cat like you can't imagine."

"Why? Are you leaving? Uncle Sergei?"

“Not really leaving. Just moving house, I suppose.”

“What a shame,” Boris said, sincerely upset.

“It’s all right. You can take the kitten to that animal shelter down the street. Know where it is? Here’s some money for cat food and stuff. Just give it to them, and they’ll keep him,” I said, handing him two of the really large bills I had.

Judging by how the kid’s eyes opened wide, he’d never handled this kind of money before. Still, he overcame his excitement and thanked me, then crumpled the bills in his hand and shoved them deep down his pocket. That done, he zipped up his jacket and headed for the shelter in a firm, purposeful stride.

Interestingly, the Game didn’t say anything about this sudden bout of generosity. Maybe a cat’s life wasn’t worth much in its scheme of things. Which was actually for my own benefit. Losing my new Avatar was the last thing I needed. In fact, I should be more careful in the future and keep any such grand gestures to a bare minimum.

It took me forever to climb the few flights of stairs to my apartment. I was too busy searching for the right words and rehearsing the upcoming conversation, playing it out in my head. I wasn’t happy with the result. A distressed Bumpkin could transform into a truly powerful destructive force — so I had to break the news to my house goblin with maximum diplomacy.

“Hi Bump,” I said.

“Hi Master.”

This time, he didn’t materialize out of thin air. Instead, he walked out to meet me, his arms crossed, his brow frowned. Could he sense something? Probably. When I’d died, he’d very nearly lost his mind.

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. You couldn't start this kind of conversation without some kind of preamble. So I took a roundabout approach,

"What have we got for lunch?"

"Solyanka soup," he replied, glaring at me from under his eyebrows like I was an enemy of the people and he the firing squad. "Buckwheat and liver, with plenty of onions and sour cream. My Gran's recipe. She used to cook all offal that way. And some fruit jelly. You've never tasted anything like it[i]."

Gradually, he relaxed. His furrowed face brightened up. His arms left their defensive position and switched to his hips. That's how it always works. Let someone speak about the things they're passionate about, and the person will transform before your very eyes. Apparently, it worked for house goblins too.

I took my time over my meal. I still had plenty of time till my RV with Arts, and I really needed to focus on the task at hand now. I couldn't just announce, 'Sorry, Bumpkin, we've got to break up. It's not about you, it's about me.'

I'd finished off the liver, polished off a third bowl of jelly and was just about to open my mouth to speak when the doorbell rang.

"Hi," my sister Lily stormed into the apartment, pulling off her Guard's mask.

"Mind your manners, girl," I said. "How about you take your filthy boots off?"

"Oh please. It's not as if you do the cleaning, is it? You've been working this goblin of yours into the ground."

Still, she pulled off her high leather boots and demonstratively headed for the kitchen where she poured herself a glass of water and gulped it down in two large swigs.

Then she nodded to me, “You’re coming with me.”

“Am I under arrest?”

“Will you just stop it now? You don’t joke about these things. The Order has some very serious intentions about your half-blood ass. Your Player’s citizenship will depend on how you present yourself to them. A lot of people believe you can’t be controlled.”

“They might be right,” I said with a grin as I slumped onto a stool. “So that’s why they sent you instead of dispatching a whole army of Guards to get me? They wanted you to put me on a leash and take me to the Order’s trial?”

“Sergei! Stop putting words in my mouth!”

I chuckled. Funnily enough, I wasn’t at all angry. I was completely free of hatred. Yesterday’s me might have been wrecking the apartment already in a fit of blind fury — or alternatively seeking an excuse for Darkie to manifest himself.

What a transformation! All it had taken was to lull my Dark side into sleep, max out my karma and get rid of that wretched sword. Easy!

“Congratulations, Sis. I can see you got your priorities straight in no time. Top points for choosing Game over Family. This is how great Players are made.”

“You don’t understand, do you?” she said. “This way it’s better for everyone.”

“Including myself? Are you sure?”

I smiled as I watched her blush — whether with anger or embarrassment, I just couldn't tell.

This whole exchange was beginning to tire me out. This is what happens when you can see that there's no hope for a constructive dialogue. All that you want is to wrap it up and go your separate ways.

On the other hand, I had to look for the positive side. Like, Lily had just arrived at my apartment on her own accord, saving me the trouble of looking for her all over town.

"You can tell your buddies they won't see me again," I said. "I'm leaving today. And I won't be back."

She didn't seem to have expected that at all. "You're leaving? Where to now?"

"I'd rather not discuss it. I've seen enough movies to know that whoever reveals their plans to other characters always comes to a sticky end. Besides, it's not you I'm talking to now, is it? I'm talking to the entire Order, right?"

"Sergei, please!"

"But Lil, really. It's okay. You must have done the right thing."

"Allow me to see you to the door," Bumpkin said adamantly.

She looked at us, uncomprehending. "But Sergei..."

I shook my head. "You'd better do as he says."

Lily headed back into the hall and got busy pulling her boots back on with an offended expression. Only when she reached for the front door handle did she glance back at me.

“So when are you coming back?” she asked.

I paused, then shrugged. “Search me.”

I was itching to say ‘Never’. After some deliberation, I added,

“No matter how far your greatness might take you, please keep an eye on the family.”

She grumbled something before slamming the door. Her stiletto heels rattled down the steps.

So much for a warm family farewell. Not that we’d ever been close. Lily and I, we’d never been the joined at the hip type. None of that “siblings in Spirit” nonsense. But I’d thought I could at least count on a pat on the back or even on her shedding a dignified girly tear. So much for my illusions.

Then again, maybe she’d thought I wasn’t serious. Thought I was just being a drama queen.

The problem was, Bumpkin didn’t think so at all. “Master? Where did you say you were going?”

“Bumpkin, please... ”

“And then he says he won’t be back,” Bumpkin voice quivered. “It’s because of me, isn’t it? You couldn’t kick me out so you decided to... to... well, you know...”

“Bumpkin? Do we have anything to drink in this house?”

“Sure,” the goblin said, sniffing. “I’ve made a nice batch of herbal cordial the other day. Borrowed some vodka from your friend upstairs. He’s quit drinking so he won’t be needing it, anyway.”

“So let’s have some, then. We need to talk.”

We walked back into the kitchen. A familiar old carafe materialized on the table, the one that had been gathering dust on the top shelf for ages — and which now took pride of place in our kitchen, its fat contours glinting with the ruby liquid within.

Without saying a word, Bumpkin opened some of his homemade pickles to chase it down with, then reached for two tea cups from the rack. Well, what did you expect? I was never a hard liquor guy. Never had any need for a shot glass in my house. If I had to ruin my liver, I much preferred doing it with a liberal amount of beer.

“Let’s have a drink first,” I said, pouring out the beverage.

Not for a single moment did I doubt the properties of liquor that came out of Bumpkin’s very own distillery. The drink glided down my stomach. I promptly chased it with a pickle.

Unfortunately, I gained neither the intoxication nor the confidence I’d hoped for. So I was obliged to brace myself and force the conversation,

“Well, you know, Bump, er—”

The doorbell rang again. I swung round, glaring at it, then forced myself to my feet. Could it be Lily reconsidering her ways and wishing to bid her brother a proper farewell?

Still, my faith in human nature once again proved ungrounded. It was Boris again, slightly out of breath and rosy-cheeked from the cold.

“Uncle Sergei, I took the kitten to them. They said they would charge me 6,000 rubles[ii] for having him fostered. Here’s your change,” he handed me a bunch of crumpled bills.

Okay. My faith in human nature may be lacking, but some individuals deserved all the due I could give them.

I tousled his fur hat and smiled. “You’re a good guy, Boris, you know that? How did you do it so quickly?”

“I ran all the way there, didn’t I? And back. They didn’t believe me though. I said I got the money from a neighbor and they said I must have stealed it from my parents. So I told them about you, and they believed me. I told them your name and address. Said you were a real nice guy.”

All my bitterness just vanished. “Boris, Boris. It’s a good job you don’t work for the government, isn’t it?”

“Did I do it wrong?”

“Oh no, not at all. You did everything right. It got you the result you needed, and that’s all that matters. Keep the change, please.”

“Thanks. I might buy something for mom, then. Something to make her happy. Then she might let me keep the kitten.”

“Excellent strategy,” I said. “Just try to pace yourself, okay? Don’t rush it. Buy it some other time. Deal?”

“Yeah.”

I closed the door and returned to the kitchen. With a tact remarkable in a goblin, Bumpkin promptly refilled the cups.

Having downed his, he used his hand to wipe his lips and gave me an expectant look. “And?”

“Well, you see,” I said, crunching on a pickled gherkin, “I was just about to tell yo—”

But today, the Universe seemed to be intent on making fun of me. Either that, or it simply didn't want me to part ways with my house goblin. Because as soon as I opened my mouth, the doorbell rang again.

Well, whoever it was, they deserved a few well-measured but strong words of discouragement.

I walked back into the hall and laid a hesitant hand on the lock as a very unpleasant gut feeling began gnawing at my insides. Wretched intuition! Still, I opened the door. This was my house, after all. What could possibly happen to me here?

Yeah right.

I barely had time to notice a short dude with funny hair, clad in some sort of hippie-ish clothing. Must have escaped from a funny farm. Or some remote Game world, you never know.

That was the only thing I'd had time to think of. The stranger promptly cast a powerful spell which sent me flying through the air.

That can't have been regular Telekinesis, either. A regular Telekinesis would have never been able to ram me through the bathroom wall as this one had done. As it was, I was now sitting on the bathroom floor, quite lost for words and powdered with a liberal amount of dust settling on the scene.

Your Unarmored Combat skill has increased to level 13.

The stranger grinned with half of his face, as if the other half was paralyzed. Then he stepped into the hall.

Or should I say, attempted to step in. Because the doorway was instantly blocked by a tiny fur ball which, as of today, was still holding the position of my house goblin.

“Not in *my* house you don’t,” Bumpkin said, hands firmly on hips. His body language promised nothing good.

Run, I was about to shout to him as I desperately tried to find a grip and haul myself back to my feet, surmounting the effects of this accidental knockdown. Still, Bumpkin seemed to be managing very well without me, thank you.

The sight of him wiped the grin off my offender’s face as if he’d seen a ghost and not a sentient creature the size of a cat. Which gave the said sentient ghost the grace time he needed to counterattack.

I didn’t even get the chance to work out what was going on. Bumpkin wasn’t making any fancy gestures with his hands the way magicians do on stage. He wasn’t spewing out spells or stomping his feet in rage. It’s just that my apartment was suddenly caught in the swirl of a tornado which swept up the aggressive dude and tossed him out like some shaggy doormat. And judging by the tinkling of broken glass in the stairwell, he must have landed some distance away from our residential property.

Finally, I managed to scramble back to my feet and staggered toward the hall.

The front door stood wide open. The stairwell window was indeed broken — or should I say, wrestled out of its frame as if rammed by a creature of an incredible weight and size. Actually, it *was* rammed, but the dude who’d just tried to attack me was hardly an ounce over 160 pounds.

I walked down the stairs toward the broken window and peered out. The snow bank next to the garages was crushed, indicating the guy’s crash site. Other than that, there was no trace of him anywhere. Somehow I didn’t think he got killed, because I couldn’t see any dust scattered anywhere. Which meant he’d managed to leg it.

Young people and their manners! I mean, how difficult had it been to introduce himself and explain his business?

I started brushing the debris off my head but froze.

Excuse me? What about all the racket, the window being smashed and all — and you want to tell me that none of my neighbors had been curious enough to check out the reason for all the commotion? Not even Boris' mom Lydia who was admittedly too curious for her own good?

I walked back to my apartment — then froze again, unable to contain a four-letter amazement.

The bathroom wall which I had just managed to demolish with enviable efficiency — of which my aching back and my dust-covered head were witness — was already back in one piece.

I reached out and touched it. And once I turned around, I realized I was going slightly mad, because the stairwell window was perfectly intact, too.

"Is it my imagination?" I muttered. "Bumpkin, are you sure you didn't spike your cordial with something I shouldn't know about?"

"Imagination, yeah right!" Bumpkin said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "What an idiot! He probably didn't know I was here. Completely off his head, that one. Attacking a fellow Player in his own home in full view of his house goblin!"

"That was a stupid thing to do, I agree. But who was it, do you know?"

"No idea. Stupid enough to do this, that's for sure. At least now he knows he should stay away from this place. That's called experience. Nothing helps to learn one's lesson better than a good kick up one's ass."

"Hey Bumpkin, you think there's still some of your rotgut left?"

We came back into the kitchen. Bumpkin poured out the drink — which seemed to be shrinking way too rapidly — and downed his without chasing it down. I followed suit, then reached for another gherkin.

“So what was it?” I asked.

“What was what, Master?”

“All this low-altitude flying. The dude escaped the premises faster than a greased turd on steroids. Or whatever.”

Bumpkin shrugged. “Well, what did he expect? A house goblin is the same as a king in his castle. That’s why we never leave our four walls. We become one with them. It’s the walls that give us strength. A Player! I could take on a God if I really wanted to, provided I’m on my own turf. And provided said God is stupid enough to turn up unannounced.”

“But what with all the fast-track renovations?” I asked, pointing in the direction of the bathroom.

“I’ve just told you, haven’t I? A house goblin becomes one with the walls he guards. And your house is real big. You might not own all of it, but I’m obliged to take care of it, seeing as I’m the only house goblin here. I need to make sure everything is in good order. That’s why I keep repairing what some other idiots break. And that’s also why I keep it quiet when necessary. Just to make sure no one overhears what they’re not supposed to.”

Aha. At least that explained the provenance of some of the foodstuffs he used in his cooking, those which I definitely hadn’t bought. Why not? Hadn’t he just said this whole apartment block was his property? Which also explained my neighbors’ lack of curiosity: Bumpkin must have averted their attention from our petty little brawl.

Still, all joking aside, our conversation — which I had quite deftly managed to delay so far — had now entered its final stretch.

“Okay, Bump, let’s talk business now. As you’ve already worked out yourself, I’m about to leave. Nobody needs me here anymore. My family have forgotten all about me. I have virtually no friends left, and the few I still have are coming with me. Also, I have a mission to complete. Know what I mean? Which is why—”

“You’re gonna dump me,” Bumpkin said with quivering lips. Tears welled in his eyes.

“Of course I don’t! You think I forgot what happened to that barnyard keeper? I did some research. Apparently, a house goblin can change master upon mutual agreement.”

Bumpkin didn’t say a word. He just kept staring at me, his gaze laced with the same kind of mistrust as that of the Mayan tribes looking at the arriving conquistadors who were about to strip them of their treasures.

“So Bumpkin,” I continued, “I’ve found you a new master. Actually, he doesn’t know about it yet. But I have a funny feeling he’s gonna like it.”

“And who might that be? Is he known for any lechery and sinful behavior? Does he like his food? Is he messy?” Bumpkin showered me with so many questions I really didn’t know what to say.

Here we go. Another friend bites the dust. Where was my “Fare thee well, dear Master, I will remember you in my prayers...”? The bastard hadn’t shed a single tear!

Which was actually for the better.

“Enough, Bumpkin, enough. He’s okay. I mean, he’s a good guy. There’s only one problem though. Your new master is gonna be a commoner.”

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Chapter 2

YOU CAN LIE to your friends or family; you can tell a liberal amount of fibs to those who know you — but for the sake of your own mental health, you should never lie to yourself. Still, that was exactly what I was doing now: trying to convince myself that I might be better off someplace other than Cesspit.

I knew it was BS, of course. Still, I'd made my choice. I'd drawn my own lot. And here I was, standing with my finger pressing Lydia's doorbell.

"Oh hi Sergei," Lydia said, answering the door in her kitchen apron.

She looked at me quizzically — indignantly even. Ever since I'd betrayed my true colors to her, our relationship had taken a definite turn for the worst. She'd stopped pestering me with her petty requests to pick up a yogurt or a carton of milk at the shop; in fact, judging by her frowned look, she'd crossed me off her list of good neighbors and useful acquaintances. Having said that, I spent so little time at home these days that I hardly could have run her errands for her, anyway. But the fact remained, our neighborly friendship had gone sour just lately.

Not that I cared. Correction: I didn't give a flying monkey. Considering I was probably seeing her for the last time in my life, I was free to tell her where to stuff her attitude.

So I started by blinding her with Wikipedia-level science:

“Did you know that pets teach children valuable life lessons like responsibility, trust and compassion?”

Admittedly, I’d employed a little help from my Eloquence skill. Which was probably why Lydia took my little spiel in all seriousness.

“Yeah, I think I read something about it,” she replied with a nod, her glazed-over eyes fixed firmly on me.

“Then you must know what I mean,” I said. “I’ve got to go on a trip. I might be away for quite a while. And I’ve got no one to look after my cat,” I nodded at Bumpkin cradled in my arms.

Judging by the look in his eyes, he had his reservations about my idea. Still, he knew better than to interfere. Instead, he started scratching his head vigorously.

Clever bastard! If Lydia decided he had fleas, she would never agree to my bright idea.

“Mom, please, let’s take him!” Boris helpfully offered, hovering behind her back.

“Cats shed,” she said haltingly, her gaze clearing out.

“I’m gonna vacuum the house every day,” Boris hurried to add. “I’ll be brushing him and cleaning after him and stuff.”

I very nearly said that Bumpkin could vacuum the place himself very nicely, thank you. All they’d have to do was show him how to use their household appliances in order to avoid any technogenic disasters. In which case, losing their apartment would probably be the least of their problems. Still, I bit my tongue just in time.

As far as they were concerned, the creature cuddling up in my arms was a cat: a regular long-haired kitty, shaggy but quite adorable. And cats

aren’t normally known for their housekeeping skills. Anything but.

“Let’s see what your Dad says when he’s back from work,” Lydia announced. “If he doesn’t object, then we might keep it.”

Lydia had this habit of always letting her husband have the last word — even when his decision couldn’t really affect the outcome. Whether it was her natural wisdom or plain manipulation, I just couldn’t tell. The most important thing was, she’d already agreed to my proposal in her heart of hearts, even if she hadn’t admitted it formally yet.

“Mind if I leave him with you for a couple of hours?” I lied. “I’ll pick him up later.”

Her brow furrowed with hesitation. Seeing this, Bumpkin softly snapped his fingers. A rattling noise came from the kitchen. Lydia dashed off, leaving us with Boris who was already stroking the cat gently on the head.

“Listen, Boris, there’s something I’ve got to tell you,” I said. “Only you must promise you won’t tell anyone.”

“Mum’s the word,” he assured me.

“You know I’m a bit of a wizard, don’t you?”

The boy nodded. “You can talk to birds. They do what you tell them to. And you knew about that rock, didn’t you?”

“I did, yeah. But this... er, ah, whatever. It’s probably better if I show you. Come on, Bumpkin, do it.”

Nothing really happened, if you disregarded Boris’ widened eyes which were now the size of two saucers. He stopped stroking the “cat’s” head and snapped his hand back, using it to cover his own mouth.

I could relate. He wasn’t used to this sort of thing.

“Boris, please meet Bumpkin. He’s a house goblin.”

Bumpkin proffered his hand. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Sir.”

Boris jumped back, startled. Still, he didn’t run off nor did he call his mom to his rescue. He just stood there, studying the little man fearfully but curiously.

Good boy. He was taking it well. Personally, I’d very nearly lost my marbles when the world’s magic underbelly had begun to reveal itself to me. But in Boris’ case, his curiosity was gradually taking the better of him.

“P-p-pleased to meet you too, Sir. I’m Boris.”

A small handshake for two little men — and a giant leap in a human-goblin relationship.

Boris shifted his excited gaze from Bumpkin to myself, apparently doing his best to suppress screams of joy. His very own house goblin! No one would believe him! Actually... that was something he needed to know.

“Now, Boris, listen, this is very important. No one should know about him. He’s a magical creature. In everybody’s eyes, he’s just a regular cat. But as for you...”

“I’ll be your helper,” Bumpkin butted in. “Your assistant. I could help you round the house. I can give you advice if you need it. I can fix things for you. Like these shoes you play soccer in. I was passing through your house the other day and I saw they got ripped at the heel.”

I clenched my teeth hard, suppressing a bout of laughter. Still, Bumpkin was dead serious. If anything, he was arguably more nervous than Boris was. No wonder. This was his new master, after all, even though

Boris and his family gained infinitely more from Bumpkin's presence. Provided Bumpkin didn't start walking around fixing things, of course.

Why had I decided to leave him with Boris and not (say) Lily, may you ask? Firstly, because I could see he was drawn to the boy. I knew very well where Bumpkin had been disappearing to just lately. He even knew all the rips on the boy's soccer shoes.

And secondly, had I entrusted him to Lily, he'd end up in the same position as he'd been with me, wallowing in depression and never knowing when his Player master might deign to come home to him. This was exactly the kind of life I wouldn't want for him.

But with Boris, it was totally different. For him, Bumpkin would become the welcome peephole into the world of magic.

"So Boris, what do you think?" I asked cautiously.

"I... I... yeah, sure. But I only have one bed. Where are you going to sleep, Sir?"

"That's not a problem. That can be arranged. You have this nice cabinet where your Dad keeps all his tools. And the closet! Such a fine space packed with all kinds of things. That'll keep me busy straightening it out."

So there we go, I thought with a sad smile. My chapter was over in Bumpkin's life. A new one was about to begin, with Boris at its center. Let's just hope it'll be as eventful and adventurous as a teenage boy's life should be. Which was only fair. Bumpkin deserved a caring and level-headed master.

"Boris, just please make sure no one finds out about him," I repeated. "Understood?"

The boy nodded vigorously. "Sure."

“Oh well, Bumpkin. I suppose it’s time to say goodbye.”

I crouched before him. He turned away from me and wiped his eyes, sniffing.

“It’s okay,” I said. “Everything’s gonna be fine.”

“I have a very bad feeling about it, Maste... Serge.”

“What kind of feeling?”

“I don’t think I’ll ever see you again.”

“That’s possible. What’s so bad about it? You’ll have your own life and so will I. Oh please, give it a rest. Come here to me.”

I flung my arms around the snuggly fluffball and blew a deep sigh. Never thought it would be so hard to part with him.

Bumpkin trembled in my arms, sniveling, completely losing it. I eased him away before his wailings had escalated to a fully blown meltdown.

“It’s okay, man, take it easy. Boris, gimme a five. Take care of Bumpkin, will ya? I’ll see you around!”

I hurried down the stars and out of the building.

Once outside, I turned round and took one last look at the house. Its shabby, peeling exterior felt so dear. My eyes welled with tears on their own accord. I hurried to blink them out. So many things had happened here. So many memories...

The crunching of a cab’s tires on the snow wrought me from my musings. I climbed inside and cast one last look at what constituted the

grand total of my past life.

“Let’s go, chief,” I said with a heavy sigh.

* * *

I arrived at the bank an hour earlier than planned. Arts wasn’t around yet; in fact, there were no Players inside whatsoever. Which was a good thing. That would allow me to sort out my own finances before she arrived.

There wasn’t much to sort out, really. The reason I’d had our beholder fat earnings divided equally between the four of us was purely due to the kindness of my heart. We’d made no written agreements in that regard. So all I had to do was close all our accounts, leaving only one to collect any future dividends. Having said that, said dividends seemed to have shrunk quite considerably just lately, meaning that we’d already earned most of what could be gleaned from it. All I could collect now was a pittance: precisely 400 kilos and 306 grams of dust, which wasn’t much at all considering it was the grand total of all our three accounts.

Why three and not four, might you ask? Because Litius had been smart enough to sneak in here before me and managed to lay his furry mitts on anything he could possibly claim.

I wasn’t angry with him. Pointless, really. I just accepted the fact. I still had 7,658 grams of dust in my pocket. An enormous sum of money for a commoner, enough to see them through their entire lifetime. But even to get to the center of the Universe, it was still quite sufficient, by my own calculations at least.

Arts arrived an hour before the appointed time, quite surprised to see me aimlessly hanging around the bank entrance. I broke the news of our money situation to her, then suggested we took a walk to the Community which was just down the road.

“That wretched fish eater! Wait till I see him!”

“I don’t think you’ll get the chance. He’ll probably head straight back to Ullum now to raise an insurgence or something.”

“Yeah right. He’ll only get himself caught and executed. Very clever.”

“I’m not so sure. He’s a smart bastard. He might actually pull it off. Trust him to spout a few heated speeches calling for revolution, fraternity and equality... not that I care, really. I’m too pressed for time to bother with him. I only have eight days as it is.”

Arts scoffed. “Stop being such a crybaby. All you need to do is travel to one of the Central Worlds and try to get to Anchor World from there. True, it’s not an easy task but it’s doable. Nothing bad can really happen, provided we keep a low profile. And as for any potential problems... don’t you remember that guy who used to say that if a problem can be solved with money, it’s not a problem, but a cost. How much did you say we have? Seven kilos?”

“On me, yes. Plus another two kilos someone still owes me, if I remember rightly. That’s if we forget that you failed to save me the few times you did have the chance.”

“Two kilos, bah!” she waved a dismissive hand. “I’ll raise it for you in a week once we get over all this shit.”

“You think we might?” I said with a bitter chuckle. “I had a very funny visitor this morning.”

Arts listened to me closely as was her habit, without interrupting me once. Only when I mentioned the guy’s bizarre attire did she begin asking questions,

“Did you notice a stripe that went like this?”

“Arts, are you serious? I don’t remember, do I? I didn’t even get the chance to see his development branch. Any ideas who it might have been?”

“Well, whoever it was it can’t have been one of Litius’ sidekicks. Firstly, because our feline friend has none left. Secondly, because Litius knew about Bumpkin. And attacking a house protected by a house goblin is the highest degree of cretinism.”

“That’s more or less what Bumpkin told me too.”

“Exactly. Judging by your description, it might be someone from Meyer. Their fashions do lean toward an 1970s LSD trip. A real crazy place. You wouldn’t like it.”

“I sure wouldn’t.”

“But wait a sec... Actually, Meyer might be a good option. It’s sparsely populated. And there’re lots of smugglers down there who just might happen to know how to get to—”

“I thought you’d already come up with an itinerary?”

“I did. And I’ve just changed my mind. We’re gonna get to Calon and find out the lay of the land. And talking of the Central Worlds, Meyer is actually a good option.”

“Can’t get much better, considering I’ve just very nearly been killed by one of its residents.”

“Don’t be so negative. We just don’t know. He might not be from there at all. In any case, we can’t be tracked down easily now. Tonight, we’ll already be in the Central Worlds. The only thing that can possibly happen to us is that our finances might take a hit. Jumping worlds is prohibitively expensive down there. Their Gatekeepers are really spoiled.”

“We’ll have to wait and see.”

Admittedly, something just didn’t feel right, even if I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. I just had a very bad feeling about it all. Which had nothing to do with my intuition, either. This was something on a much larger scale — something I just couldn’t quite work out.

So I didn’t tell Arts anything. Normal. If I had no idea what it was, what was the point?

But once we got to the Community, I really didn’t know what to think anymore.

Because the place was in shambles. It had just become the arena of a major battle.

A battle till bitter end.

The moment we stepped in, we knew it. The walls of the nearest buildings were charred and fire-licked. The road was pockmarked with deep shell holes. A couple of Guards were busy collecting and folding the robes and masks of their less fortunate comrades. The opposite side of the road was littered with heaps of colored garments piled up with no respect whatsoever.

I didn’t like it at all.

All the other Guards were standing next to the Syndicate, talking in excited voices. The few Players that exited the building tried to sneak past them inconspicuously, disappearing promptly out of sight.

Whether because of that or for whatever other reason I failed to identify, my arrival had the effect of Mick Jagger dropping in at a local village store.

Admittedly, I didn’t enjoy it.

The square fell silent, watching our advance. The feeling was spooky, like watching a 1960s horror movie. The best thing we could probably do was get the hell outta here. The Guards weren't my friends at the best of times; besides, I had a funny feeling that if they looked a bit closer into what had just happened, they just might discover my connection to all of this.

I also glimpsed Lily standing slightly aside from the rest. She wasn't in a hurry to walk over to me, which only confirmed my worst suspicions. She didn't want to be linked to me.

Oh well. Let it be so.

I pulled Arts by the hand toward the Gatehouse.

A few Guards followed after us, one of them no other than Lightning Rod. The top brass had arrived, oh well. The Guards kept at a respectful distance without falling too far behind.

We walked past the Syndicate and turned into a side lane past several houses — one of which used to be Traug's humble abode — until we came to the Gatehouse. I walked through its invariably open doors and turned back, knowing that here I was well and truly safe.

"You think they came here to get me?" I asked.

"Didn't get a chance to ask," one of the Guards replied, peering at me from behind his black mask. "They opened fire before we could say Jack. But I can't think of anything else that might attract Central World Players to our backwater."

"Let me guess. What about our chocolate sundaes?"

"Are you really leaving? That's what your sister said."

"I am indeed."

“I hope you never come back. I’d rather some other worlds have this headache for a change. You’re too conspicuous. You’ve become too dangerous for your close ones,” he said, shifting his gaze to Arts.

I didn’t reply. Instead, I headed toward the Gatekeeper.

The Guard hadn’t said anything I didn’t already know. My notoriety and the sheer number of Avatars I’d amassed had indeed made me way too conspicuous, making me a magnet for all sorts of problems and freaks. The latter seemed to be thinking that they could succeed where the Horsemen of Apocalypse had failed, by killing me. Yeah right. We all think we’re special, don’t we?

“Arts, I have no intention of waiting for you. Let’s pay and leave already.”

“Coming,” she said, rummaging through her interface until she found something. “Here! Aasmuth.”

“What the hell is that?”

“Just a small town in Firoll. First we’ll go to Skirtsville, seeing as you like it so much. From there we’ll jump to Aasmuth. Seeing as you’re persona non grata in both Mechilos and Elysium, not to mention Atrain, Firoll seems like the most logical option.”

“Makes sense,” I said, pouring the dust into the bowl. “I don’t give a damn anymore. Give me your hand. If you say stinky Skirtsville, then stinky Skirtsville it is!.. Skirtsville,” I repeated, this time addressing the armored giant.

The dust in the bowl rose into the air.

It took me a while to realize something was wrong. The place was stinky all right, its air thick with the effluvia heavy enough to knock a

novice Player off their feet. Me, I just winced.

What did make me tense was the sight of a few feathered figures hovering nearby.

My gut feeling hadn’t failed me. I slid my hand out of Arts’ and even managed to draw my trusty Katzbalger which luckily was maxed out for damage to creatures of Light.

At that moment, the lights went out.

Which was something I hadn’t counted on at all.

[∞]

The dust rose into the air.

What a shame! I’d already uttered the name of our destination!

So this time, as soon as we’d been jumped to Skirtsville, I drew the Katzbalger, simultaneously casting Wave of Fire.

I didn’t get the chance to see whether it had worked — because, just like the first time, darkness enveloped me.

Arts’ scream assaulted my eardrums, followed by the Gatekeeper’s indignant beckoning. Steel clattered against steel, followed by the screech of metal on stone. I heard the flapping of wings.

But even before any of this had happened, several pairs of strong hands grabbed me, pulling me up and dragging me away.

The sickening air of Skirtsville assaulted my nose; the outside air tousled my hair, making me realize that the worst had already happened. Someone had just whisked me away from the safety of the Gatekeeper’s

protection. He wouldn’t be able to help me any longer. In fact, no one would.

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Chapter 3

A SUCCESSFUL MILITARY CAMPAIGN finds strength in its unity. If each of its members pursues their own motives, the whole thing is doomed to fail. An isolated Player just can’t be a serious threat — but once they unite into a steely fist, they become a power to be reckoned with.

That’s why I wasn’t particularly worried. The group of Archali who’d just kidnapped me were hardly a like-minded bunch.

My vision had returned to me almost straight away, virtually as soon as they’d carried me out of the Gatehouse. The Archali didn’t even try to keep a low profile. They walked a short distance from the building and just dumped me on the ground like a sack of shit.

After a short while, two more arrived, dragging Arts along. Of course: she must have darted after me, thus losing her protection as well. Stupid girl. Such a shame it happened so quickly — too quickly for the Gatekeeper to mete out justice and kill at least a couple of the attackers.

Arts tried to resist this makeshift detention — and promptly paid the price. One of the kidnappers, a certain Bawler, was apparently lacking in the manners department, probably thinking that if a lady dealt the first blow, she could be treated as a sparring partner. So the moment Arts’ fist connected with his liver, he gave her a mighty whack on the face, sending the girl flying to the ground. Although conscious, she was admittedly quite stunned.

I made a mental note of the incident. He'd answer for this too, the bastard.

Having dumped us to the ground, the Archali engaged in a heated argument, giving me a chance to get a good view of them. Actually, they looked almost identical, all of them tall and blond with feathered bodies and chiseled features. But as for their development branches, it was getting interesting.

So, from left to right: ***Lucky, Seafarer, Replenisher, Bawler*** and — surprise — a ***Darkener***. I bet he was the one responsible for my temporary lapse of vision.

While I was deliberating which one of them I should kill first — and most importantly, how I could Houdini my way out of my bonds — the Archali began to argue. Initially, they only spoke their own birdlike tongue — but eventually, they began peppering their speech with familiar words until finally, they switched to human speech entirely. That's when their friendly exchange became really heated.

"We have orders! Tweedity-tweet! Chirpy chirpy cheep!" Seafarer fumed.

"Listen, you know who he is better than I do. Commander Rafael might commend us or have us promoted, and then what? Big deal! Listen to me: this dude is our lucky ticket. If we play our cards right, we might be set for life," Replenisher argued, stirring trouble.

I immediately knew what he meant. Instantly my thinking processes stepped up a gear.

So the Archali hadn't given up. They'd even dispatched several assault squads to the few Gatehouses they expected me to use. And judging by the outcome, it had been worth their while. The bird walked right into the trap.

So what were they supposed to do next? They seemed to know how to transport me to Elysium from here. The problem was, not all of them were prepared to follow their commander's orders for free. Which was arguably my only chance of escaping.

"Who else is of the same opinion?" Seafarer snapped. He didn't strike me as a patient type. I doubted he would pussyfoot around the insurgents.

Unsurprisingly, no one was too eager to challenge him. Even Replenisher reluctantly shut up and kept his neck firmly tucked into his collar.

Which meant it was my turn to walk into the limelight.

"Did you say Rafael?" I said, infusing my voice with all the amazement I could muster. "Is he still around?"

All of them turned to look at their impudent prisoner. Even Bawler, still standing next to Arts who froze on the ground, not knowing what I was up to but sensing that something was in the air.

"How dare you utter the glorious name of our Chief Commander with that foul mouth of yours?!" Seafarer enunciated.

"Oh, I dare! To you he may be a Chief Commander. To his friends, he's just Raf. Come on, take me to him. I'm sure we'll come to an agreement."

"What?!" Seafarer gasped, choking on his fury, wheezing and knitting his pale eyebrows as if trying to incinerate me with his glare.

It didn't last very long though. Eventually Seafarer got a grip and walked over to me, his clenched teeth the only sign of his anger.

I braced myself for a physical assault. Probably, a good kick on the head. Still, luckily for me, this Seafarer proved to be the businesslike type.

“Can you swear us an oath that you will go to Elysium of your own free will?” he said with a gut-wrenching little smile.

“Easy. As long as you swear an oath too, promising we will go to see Commander Rafael and not somebody else.”

This was the biggest bluff I’d ever tried to pull off in my entire lifetime. If it failed, they’d see right through my little plan. Because no one in their sane mind would willingly go to the chopping block of their own free will.

Still, it looked like my little lie had become the gear wheel which set the heavy machine of their disagreement in motion. All I had to do now was watch it do its job.

“I will swear the oath,” Seafarer said. This way we won’t have to fetch the submission potion. Because we only have one vial of it left between all of our groups. In which case...”

Your Lying skill has increased to level 10.

You’ve reached level 15.

“We haven’t finished yet,” Replenisher said through clenched teeth. “Do you suggest we take this midget to Rafael so he can pay his way out, and that’s it? That’s not very fair, is it?”

“It’s not for you to talk about justice!” Seafarer snapped. “We need to do our duty!”

“And what if I don’t?”

“Well, I’m gonna make you, ain’t I?”

The familiar angel-issue sword materialized in Seafarer’s hand. Not that it scared Replenisher who reached for his own, then took a few steps back, inviting his opponent to follow.

Crunching his vertebrae, Seafarer headed toward him, stepping softly. All the other Archali appeared engrossed in the upcoming duel, which made my task all the easier.

First, I scrolled through my interface to locate the description I needed:

An upgrade of your current development branch is available. You have two of the following options:

— decrease the number of charges required for each use by 1, or

— decrease cooldown time 1 sec

Decreasing cooldown time was a huge temptation, of course. Still, an upgrade like this wasn’t really useful against a whole bunch of enemies. Now decreasing the number of charges was exactly what the doctor ordered. I had forty-four charges, eight per each use, which made it five cooldowns in total. This was a no-brainer.

I used the opportunity to check out the item which was supposed to boost my stats — namely, my trench coat. The Game didn’t let me down: it also seemed to have grown somewhat.

Destroyer Mage’s Old Trench Coat
Adaptable to owner’s level
+624 to mana.
+17% to damage from all Destruction spells used by the owner
+12% to absorption of all hostile Destruction spells
+9% to deflection of all hostile Destruction spells
+8% to duration of all Modification and Illusions spells

Which could only mean one thing. I now had enough mana to cast a spell which just might help us escape.

The rest was paperwork.

My next job was crawl closer to Arts. Although Bawler was standing literally just one step away from her, he wasn't looking at her anymore.

My progress wasn't fast. Try to make a go for it when your feet are tied and your hands are bound together behind your back. Plus, I had to be really quiet, otherwise there was no point doing it.

Luckily, the Game sent me a sign, letting me know I was on the right track:

Your Stealth skill has increased to level 6.

Further away, Seafarer and Replenisher had already begun to sort out their differences. I watched their duel out of the corner of my eye while keeping a close watch on the other ones. At first, Seafarer seemed to be having the upper hand, making me worried their fight might end too soon for me to do anything. Still, after a couple of reluctant retreats, Replenisher switched to the offensive. Their swords sliced through the air, chopping up their invisible opponents, clattering carnivorously against the duelers' armor. The two Archali had united in a mesmerizing choreography of combat, becoming a single whole, inseparable and unfathomable.

Still, I had no time to appreciate their strife. I was too busy crawling toward Arts with all the speed and grace of a caterpillar on ludes. By then, my friend had already come round somewhat and was watching the duel with great interest, curious which one of the two might win the possession of my sorry ass with a view to reselling it for profit. Thankfully, she'd already noticed my own valorous advance.

I cast a wary look at Bawler who was standing sideways not two steps away from me. Luckily for me, he didn't appear to notice me. I'd read that

apparently, all males had weaker peripheral vision as opposed to females — and it looked like this particular peculiarity wasn't limited to human race alone. Whatever the case, Bawler didn't even budge, so engrossed he was in following Seafarer and Replenisher's lethal dance.

Which was exactly what I needed.

I arched my back and tried to reach out with my arms as far as I could, groping for the cold touch of steel as it sliced through my bonds. After a couple of excruciatingly long seconds I was already wriggling out of my tethers, doing it as slowly and inconspicuously as I could.

Arts crouched, reaching for her trusty staff. I pressed a finger to my lips, pointing at Darkener. His ability made him our primary target, because the moment he activated it, we were as good as dead.

I'd never served in the army, so my idea of a special op was vague to say the least. Still, our actions were choreographed to perfection, even if I say so myself. Worthy of an action movie, really.

Darkener stood slightly aside from the rest. I pointed at him, then ran the side of my hand across my throat. Arts knew immediately what I meant. On the third count of my fingers, a fireball shot out of Arts' staff, heading for the bastard.

And just before that happened, I'd donned Reaper's Avatar, activating Justice simultaneously with her attack. Why not? Darkener had attacked me, hadn't he? So it was his problem, then.

I shot out a commanding hand. A faint silvery glow escaped my fingers, instantly transforming into a hefty battle hammer which tumbled through the air, overtaking Arts' fireball in full flight, then rammed Darkener's chest, throwing him off balance. The fireball connected with his feathery body just as he fell, enveloping his wings in a cloud of flames. With a short shriek, Darkener collapsed to the ground.

“Got him!” Arts shouted to me, not bothering to keep our little op a secret any longer.

The two dueling Archali froze in place like two fighting dogs doused with cold water. That moment of hesitation was enough for me to grab Arts by the shoulder and cast Mist with my free hand. It was actually Darkener who gave me the idea: I basically did the same thing as he’d done to us. Mist made us invisible to all Players — okay, it only lasted fifteen seconds (I didn’t even count the 8% bonus from the trench coat) but it was still enough for us to leg it. We can’t have been that far from the Gatehouse — and the only person capable of rendering the three of us blind (by three I mean Arts, myself and the Gatekeeper) was now lying on the ground turning into a pile of dust.

Talking about the Gatekeeper, I still had my doubts. Could Players’ magic even affect those ancient titans?

Myself, I could see pretty well under Mist, at least at close distances. It was like peering through a thick sheet of rain. Anything further than ten or fifteen paces was already a challenge: all I could make out was the vague outlines of the Archali stumbling in the dark like a litter of blind kittens, walking in circles with their arms outstretched in front of them.

Then I suddenly remembered that we needed to hurry.

I hadn’t forgotten the mental note I’d made about the Bowler. I gave him a hearty kick in the groin to make sure he remembered his manners next time. Besides, that would discourage him from using his own ability, whatever it was called.

I seemed to have succeeded. Wheezing, Bawler began to sink to his knees. I pulled Arts by the hand, and we ran: two human beings enveloped in a magic Mist.

I could have used Whirlwind, I suppose — but it didn’t have quite so big a range and admittedly all it did was obstruct your enemy’s visibility.

Mist, however, rendered all your opponents completely helpless.

Or so I'd thought until Lucky materialized right by the entrance to the Gatehouse. Don't get me wrong, I knew I wasn't the only proud owner of Incremental Apparition, but in order to teleport blindly onto the mountain path you either had to be proficient in Mysticism or...

Or you had to be damn lucky as his name suggested.

Still, I had a trick up my own sleeve too.

I drew the Katzbalger as I ran and feigned a lunge, dealing him a sideways blow. As luck (or its absence thereof) would have it, my foot tripped, causing my hand to slip, hitting him with the flat of the sword.

Never mind. I had plenty of charges to spend on a worthy Archalus like him.

[∞]

Still, my foot tripped again, skidding over the pebbles just as I was about to take a lunge. Both of us collapsed to the dusty ground. I tried to hit him again and again but Lucky kept dodging my blows. Either that, or...

[∞]

No, he dodged them all right. In fact, neither his agility nor his reaction times were that great. It's just that something or other was constantly in my way. My hand got caught in the skirts of my trench coat; then his fluttering wing raised a cloud of dust into the air, filling my eyes with tears and wrenching a cough from my struggling lungs.

Finally I got myself a decent opponent for a change! His luck was nothing spectacular, but it was still enough to counter my time rewinds.

Talking about luck, it didn’t last that long for him, after all. Had I been alone, we might have played this game of see-saw for quite a while. But I had Arts with me who must have decided to put an end to our exchange. She used her staff in a rather unconventional manner, clubbing Lucky on the head.

Such an unorthodox approach produced the desired effect. Lucky slumped to the ground. I climbed back to my feet, fully intending to finish him off, when an expertly launched rock shattered to smithereens right next to me.

“Mist has expired!” Arts shouted.

I turned round just in time to see three very angry Archali taking to the wing. Correction: two very angry Archali. Bawler was flapping his wings while standing firmly on the ground nursing his private parts.

If the truth were known, between my Avatar and what charges I still had, I could definitely challenge the outcome of our little rendezvous. Still, I decided to fall on a different adage: namely, *he who can avoid a battle is not a coward but a survivor.* Especially because I was literally a stone’s throw away from the wide open doors of a safe house guarded by a pro bono protector of all and sundry.

This made it a no-brainer. We darted into the safety of the Gatehouse.

The Archali didn’t seem in a hurry to follow suit. Without Darkener, there wasn’t really a lot they could do. They stopped some distance away from the entrance, just outside of Art’s range, and began to squabble.

I could relate. On one hand, they failed to carry out their orders. On the other, they equally failed to raise a bit of money for their trouble. What kind of life was that?

“Arts, come quick! Where to now?”

“Tyrolt! Tyrolt, eighty-six!”

“Tyrolt!” I shouted, pouring the right amount of dust into the bowl.

It instantly rose into the air.

My nose began to itch. My eyes watered. The stench of Skirtsville was gone, replaced by a different but equally obnoxious effluvia of rotten eggs.

“Let me guess. Are we in Firoll?”

“Well, where do you think we are?” Arts wheezed, still hot with adrenaline.

I walked over to the doorway and peeked out.

No rivers of fiery lava. No sinners subjected to everlasting torture. Not even a chief devil in sight. Plenty of Kabirids waiting nearby, performing the same kind of customs control as the one in Elysium.

Which meant that no one with a light karma could get past them. What about me? Not that I intended to test my luck.

Admittedly, the place was a far cry from the familiar picture of the Biblical hell. Plants were quite miserable though, puny and ugly. A small castle towered on a nearby hill — the late Middle Ages, by the looks of it. It was surrounded by a smattering of lakes that reeked of sulfur. That was the extent of it.

What kind of life was this for a demon? Their illustrious opponents had so much verdure in their Elysian pastures that you wished you could reincarnate as a cow.

“Don’t even think of stepping out,” Arts snapped.

“You think I’m stupid?” I said, crouching next to a wall.

I could use the little time till our next jump to do some number-crunching.

Available points: 3
Strength: 31 (x)
Intellect: 29 (x)
Fortitude: 26 (x2)
Agility: 35 (x3)
Stamina: 24 (x)
Rhetoric: 31 (x3)
Speed: 19 (x2)

Once again I went with the flow, investing the biggest bonuses into Agility and Rhetoric. The latter was the easiest to level, which was a shame, of course, but that was the price you paid for being human. I didn’t even need it really, considering I was constantly obliged to solve any arising problems with violence. The double bonus was a no-brainer too. It wasn’t every day I could level up Speed, so there it went. That was about it.

After we’d exchanged a few pleasantries about our lucky delivery from the Archali, Arts motioned me to get back to my feet. It was already time for our next jump.

Next destination: Noggle, my unmissed home world. Even with my discount, the fare had risen to 98 grams of dust.

This time too, Arts had selected a forlorn Gatehouse next to a tiny hamlet, allowing us to sit it out without any further aggravation other than our frozen backsides. Before we continued on the next leg of our journey, Arts thought it better to instruct me:

“Qird is a very particular place. Lots of passage there. Just keep your mouth shut, will you? I decided to jump via Vieltplain. It’s a tiny little town in the east.”

“Isn’t it the place where they make those uppers?”

“Not only. Give me the money, quick. It’s 140 grams. Can’t you see the Gatekeeper’s waiting?”

“Honestly, I don’t. I haven’t yet learned to read into their helmet expressions. If he removes it, I might be more considerate. Did you say a hundred and forty? They’ll bleed us dry by the time we’re there. Never mind. Vieltplain!”

I really didn’t like the sight of the Vieltplain Gatehouse. Dimly lit, with the fare collection bowl set at its center, it was actually quite standard, had it not been for one tiny little detail.

The Gatekeeper was missing.

I’d already been in a similar situation once. And had it not been for Arts, I wouldn’t have lived to tell the tale.

“Oooh-kay,” Arts said slowly.

I walked over to the exit and peered out at the grim overcast sky.

What an interesting place. The ground was studded with thornbushes and some bizarre yellow crystals sticking out of the sand. Further on, a sea of blue and green forest rustled on a hill. The world looked as if it had already downed a couple of uppers. The only thing that ruined the vista was a large pile of smoldering rubble further north.

I turned to Arts. “Are you sure this is the right place? There’s nothing but ruins here.”

“Exactly,” she replied. “These ruins is what’s left of Vieltplain.

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Chapter 4

WHEN A MAN — or any sentient being, in my case — commits himself to a cause only to relinquish his duty later, the least he can expect is being ostracized by all the others. You could say that no good deed goes unpunished, I suppose.

This was more or less what I felt toward the local Gatekeeper. What a bastard! He couldn't have found a worse moment to shirk his duties. The least he could have done was scribble "Back in 15 minutes" or something of the kind. We'd been stuck here waiting for at least an hour but nothing indicated that the Gates might resume their work any time soon.

"Are we gonna wait to see what happens?" I asked Arts.

"You have a better plan?"

"How far are the nearest Gates?"

Arts fell silent, staring into space in front of her. She was checking her interface, probably studying the map of Qird and its vicinities.

"About half a day's walk," she finally said. "We might get there by the evening provided we don't get lost. It's been ages since I was here last."

"How big is it?"

"Quite big, yes. It's a market town. Think we should try it?"

“I just can’t see the point of us staying here,” I said. “We’ve been an hour and the Gatekeeper still hasn’t come. The Gatehouse seems to be functioning, just no Gatekeeper in sight. And we have a much better chance in a bigger town because they wouldn’t have left it unattended. You’d better tell me more about this world. Any predators I should know about? Vicious monsters or anything?”

Arts shrugged. “It’s just like everywhere, really. Nothing extraordinary. The local submarine life is quite a handful, of course, but there’re no seas anywhere near this place. And the local wildlife knows better than attack Players. There’re a couple of semi-sentient creatures nearby but they all steer clear of thoroughfares. As for the locals, they can give as good as they get but they try to avoid warring when they can help it. It’s quite a quiet place, actually.”

“I can see that,” I said, nodding at the site of fire. “Apparently, their biggest vice is smoking in bed drunk.”

“I agree,” she echoed. “This is something very strange.”

“Fancy going to check it out? The dead don’t bite — but they can sometimes offer some very interesting insights.”

Arts didn’t object; she reached into her inventory and produced her sword and her staff. Despite being on high alert, I wasn’t in a hurry to draw my own weapons. Nothing around us suggested I might need them.

The warm dry breeze enveloped us the moment we stepped out of the building. As it was blowing toward the ruins of the village, the air was almost free from the smell of burning.

Still, as soon as we stepped out, an invisible hand seemed to press on my shoulders, drawing me to the ground. My vertebrae crunched.

Aha. So gravity was different here. I must remember that.

I looked around matter-of-factly as if nothing had happened.

The rusty grass stained the skirts of my trench coat, raising clouds of pollen into the air. I walked over to the nearest crystal and tried to pull it out but it turned out to be remarkably heavy, sitting tight in the ground. Then again, it would probably stand little chance against Moon Steel.

“This is the stuff they make uppers from,” Arts explained. “The crystals contain some psychotropic substance. The locals distil them and use to make mind-altering drugs. Lots of interesting ingredients here, not even to mention their wildlife. This place is a junkie’s paradise.”

“If this is the case, what makes drug addicts line up for Atrain instead?”

“You’re gonna laugh but this place is only good for light recreational substances. Any heavy dust-based drugs are banned here. As the result, Qird prospers.”

“Yeah yeah. Legalized use and all that. Can’t say I like it very much. I’m probably too Russian to appreciate drug use. Now a nice big shot of vodka is something totally different...”

“You sound like Traug. He could have made a good Russian,” Arts said with a bitter smirk, turning grim.

I fell silent too. Traug’s death still hadn’t quite sunk in. A ludicrous error which shouldn’t have happened.

I’ll tell you more: I was yet to embrace the fact. It felt like he was still traveling with us, just lagging behind for some reason. Soon he’d catch up with me and slap my shoulder with that good-natured grin of his, offering to pay to get us both sloshed.

“It looks like this Vieltplain of yours has burned down very recently,” I said, changing the subject.

By then, we'd already reached the site of the fire and begun studying the scene. The charred wooden ruins, although not scorching hot, still exuded considerable warmth. The fire must have gone out very recently.

And the actual source of it remained unclear. It can't have been the attackers that had started it because some of the houses remained intact albeit charred, their window panes cracked with the heat.

Coals and cinders crunched underfoot. My nose itched with the stench. I really didn't look forward to going any further. From where I was, I could see everything I needed. Vieltplain may have been a provincial hamlet in the past — but now it has become the house of death.

I stared at charred bodies frozen in most bizarre poses. Strangely enough, most of them were quite short, with capacious chests and broad shoulders. Some had limbs missing, others appeared to have been cleft in half, yet others had their heads lopped off.

Further on, I saw a few neat piles of blackened weapons and fire-licked clothes powdered with the magic dust. Which meant that at least some of them were Players.

"Let's go," Arts said. "I don't think we're gonna find anything else here."

I nodded. Still, there was something not quite right here. My chest was rent with woe — but my eyes kept searching the ruins for something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

There just had to be something here... something very valuable.

We skirted the devastated village and started walking away from it toward the forest. Then I stopped, mesmerized by the glint of metal in the sun.

“Serge? Where d’you think you’re going?” Arts shouted.

But I was already trotting toward the speck of white glinting on the ground.

The sword rested under a collapsed stone wall. Getting it out was a job in itself. Once I’d finally cleared away all the rubble, I could finally appreciate it in all its glory.

It was a double-edged sword, slightly wider and longer than my Katzbalger, its carved hilt covered with the symbols I knew only too well. But the most interesting thing was, I could also make out the specks of Inturia fused with the steel as if the two metals had been briefly mixed and forged before they got the chance to properly merge together. This made the swordsmanship appear rather crude, like something made by a village blacksmith.

“Oh wow, what’s that?” Arts asked, walking over to me.

“That’s the answer to the Gatekeeper’s whereabouts. He must have died here somewhere. This is his sword.”

“Their swords are much bigger, normally. But it does look like it might be his. The runes on the hilt are the same as on the Gatehouse.”

I lifted the sword and very nearly dropped it. Of course. What had I hoped for?

A Short Sword
*#(@%!)#**
Warning!
Restriction: only Gatekeepers

My head swarmed with ideas. ‘Only for Gatekeepers’! When I’d killed Dendroid, his dagger too was classified as ‘only for Kabirids’. But

Gatekeepers weren’t a race, were they? So it can’t have been a racial restriction.

In which case, what were they? Or who were they? I might learn more about it once I’d gotten to Anchor World, you never know.

I stashed the sword away into my inventory. The fact that I couldn’t equip it didn’t mean it was entirely useless. A weapon like this might be in high demand — and even if it wasn’t, I could always sell it back to Gatekeepers in exchange for some Reputation, just like I’d done earlier with the bits of Inturia I’d had.

“Shouldn’t we be on our way?” Arts said.

“Sure. We’re finished here.”

After a twenty-minute walk, we’d left Vieltplain far behind. The burnt stench that hung in the air gave way to the aroma of perfumed herbs, their iridescent waves shimmering in the sunlight. I took in generous lungfuls of fragrant air, feeling so light that I began to worry that the local grass was already spreading its — what was the word Arts had used? — yes, its psychotropic properties.

The local sun was so nice and warm I was obliged to slip my trench coat off my shoulders. If you didn’t look back, you would think this was a quiet heavenly haven far removed from track of men. This was the kind of place people like to escape to, tired of all the hustle and bustle of human cities...

The forest met us with the loud chorus of birds’ voices. They didn’t really care about the desolate hamlet just up the road, burned and razed to the ground. My eyes hurt with the intense blue of the foliage, the acid green of the grass and the malachite grey of the shrubbery. It easily beat Elysium in the colors’ department.

Strangely enough, the riot of mismatched colors caused me no discomfort, even though admittedly it felt like being stuck inside a glitchy camera. Unlike some other worlds, Qird showed no aggression toward me — and I paid back in kind. It was true that our first encounter had started with the gory scenes of the burnt-down village strewn with the villagers' bodies. That's not to mention the Gatekeeper himself who'd so treacherously and inopportunely popped his clogs. Still, the world around me made it perfectly clear it had nothing to do with those unfortunate events.

And when, after another hour-plus of purposeful walking, we came across the first locals, I received yet another confirmation of their benign nature.

When we approached the forest, we found a well-trodden path that appeared to go right through it. Seeing as there didn't seem to be any other trails in the vicinity, sooner or later we were obliged to bump into someone or something. Still, I hadn't expected it to happen so quickly. Admittedly, it felt quite spooky.

I first heard the rattling of metal. Judging by the sound, it must have been something huge and hung with steel, moving in our direction.

After a short while, I made out a giant head peeking out of the tangled vegetation. Its dark green color made it hard to notice — and once I had, I promptly drew both my dagger and my Katzbalger, as if those two toothpicks could be any help against the giant monster.

He was at least ten foot tall, with a hunched back, impressive long arms and massive legs. The skin on his arms was rough and calloused, its dark green more intense closer to the wrists.

His nose took half of his face as if it had been fashioned out of clay and hastily slapped on with little care for appearances. His large mouth was surrounded by repulsive hairy warts.

The creature walked heavily as if his every step was a struggle. He shook his head with exertion, muttering something under his huge misshapen nose.

“A troll,” Arts gasped, reaching for her staff.

“I thought you said this place was nothing extraordinary?” I said, unable to suppress a quip.

She didn’t seem to know how to handle the situation, either. How were you supposed to approach this ambling monster? He’d sweep you out of his way without as much as noticing it, end of story.

In the end, we didn’t have to fight him. The clanging of steel I’d heard earlier turned out to be the sound of chains he was bound with. It took me a while to notice them, and it took me even longer to see those who kept the troll chained.

The monster was flanked by two pikemen who pulled on the chain whenever the troll attempted to wander off the path. Just as I’d thought that two guys weren’t really enough to restrain a big monster like that, I saw a small group of crossbowmen closing the rear, quite prepared to stud the giant with crossbow bolts the moment he tried to escape. Their crossbows looked quite impressive, too — more like ballistas, really.

And as for the men themselves... they proved to be even more interesting. The tallest of them barely reached Art’s shoulders, but what they lacked in height they more than made up for in build. I got the impression this was a bodybuilding team shepherded by their green-skinned coach. Being a half-Korl, I wasn’t much of a waif myself, but next to these dudes I must have looked like a dry twig carried by the wind.

“I know who they are,” I announced. “They’re gnomes!”

“Don’t you call them that!” Arts warned me. “It’s only humans who use that name. The Qirdians absolutely hate it.”

“If you say so. I abide by political correctness. If you can’t call a Qirdian a gnome, that’s fine with me. What I do find strange is that I’d never seen them before.”

“That’s because they’re not the outgoing type,” Arts replied. “Actually, they were the first to start ignoring the Game. They keep themselves to themselves, Players and commoners alike. They don’t mind a bit of trade, making money off other Players, dealing in old stock and whatnot. If there’s money in it, they’ll do it. But they have no intention of traveling the worlds.”

By then, they’d already noticed us. No wonder: we were standing in the middle of the road not knowing which direction to turn.

They stopped the troll. Two crossbowmen left their group and approached us: one with a red beard, the other one dark-haired. The former was bow-legged like a root pulled from the ground. The latter was barely half a foot taller but it made a huge difference, making him appear stronger, majestic even.

They wabbled over to us like two penguins, casting hesitant glances at Arts and myself.

“Haisa! Orr tuh doon?”

Wish I’d listened to my mom when she told me to learn languages. Luckily, Arts had a better reaction than myself.

“Human,” she said. “Cesspit.”

“I can speak human,” the Barbarossa boomed, slinging the crossbow over his shoulder with a short but mighty arm. His whole body language pointed at the fact that he was the head honcho here. “What’s your names?”

“Arts.”

“Serge.”

“I’m Cobant. Cobant has just caught this troll and is taking him to Noublindar via Vieltplain. In Noublindar, they’ll know what to do with him. The troll will stop haunting the villages. Cobant will be rewarded.”

“Ghirkin too!” the dark-haired one protested. “Ghirkin helped Cobant catch troll. Ghirkin be rewarded too.”

“You’ll get it, don’t worry,” the first gnome waved his protests away. “Cobant is your leader! Cobant put team together!” he added, raising a fat authoritative finger in front of Ghirkin’s face.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” I interrupted them. “I have no intention of butting in on your discussion, but I’m afraid, there’s a little problem with that Vieltplain of yours.”

As they listened to me, their initial surprise turned to wariness eventually replaced by mistrust. Actually, it was Cobant who listened closely, occasionally translating for his friend whose language proficiency was apparently limited to school lessons.

“It’s Brems who’s in charge of Vieltplain,” Cobant said once I’d finished. “He’s a mighty warrior. No one can beat him. His men have ten pikes and fifteen crossbows. There’re no monsters in their lands. And we Qirdians don’t wage war on each other. Why would you lie to me, stranger?”

“It’s true,” Arts butted in. “Vieltplain is burned to the ground. Its inhabitants are all killed. Including the Gatekeeper.”

Cobant cracked a sarcastic smile. Apparently, the more we said the less he believed us.

“The iron statue dead? But he can’t be killed. Horwad of Lorgondor led his hird against him but failed. And Tirgt, once he’d become a Player, tried it too. Both died. We left the iron statues well alone since.”

Arts scoffed. “Go and look for yourselves, then! Just tell us if this road will take us to the city.”

“Of course. This is the direct road to Warwth. Cobant doesn’t like it there. The ruler of Warwth doesn’t pay much for trolls.”

Ghirkin started reasoning with Cobant in their language, pointing first at us, then at Vieltplain where they were apparently heading. Cobant, however, kept waving his arguments away.

“Ghirkin here says we should turn back to Warwth. Less money but safer.”

“That’s a very good idea,” I agreed.

Why not? It was one thing to travel across a strange world just the two of us, and something totally different to join a company of local warriors who, judging by the captured troll, could well stand their ground.

Unfortunately, Cobant didn’t seem to share my enthusiasm. “Ghirkin a coward. Strangers liars. Cobant has faith in himself and his crossbow. No one can defeat Cobant here! Move it!” he motioned for the group to resume their advance.

We were obliged to step aside, giving way to them. As the green-skinned giant staggered past me, he gave me a look and groaned something. There was no hatred in his eyes, only sadness.

Strangely enough, I felt sorry for him. It was probably because the cocky and standoffish Cobant had failed to endear me to himself.

As for Arts, she didn’t give a damn about their problems. All that she worried about was whether this was the right road. In the grand scheme of things, she probably didn’t care much about the sad fate of Vieltplain, either. All it meant to her was that now we were obliged to go on a hike till the next Gate.

That wasn’t how I looked at it though.

Who could have razed down an entire village in Qird, of all places, which was a peaceful world and a good trading destination for all Players? As Arts had just described these gnomes, ‘if there’s money in it, they’ll do it’. So this was something truly outrageous. It didn’t smell good.

I suddenly remembered a similar world that too used to be a giant marketplace once, only to turn into a dust junkies’ den. It had come to ruin due to constant raids by some bizarre monsters...

My chest clenched. My heart missed a beat.

Just then, I heard a nauseating sound. The sound which seemed to rip the Universe apart; the sound that filled the very air around you and still appeared to come from afar.

Actually, it was coming from the direction of Vieltplain.

And I recognized it, too. This was the sound which used to rip the skies of Atrain open.

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Chapter 5

WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT, we all have sets of stereotypes to live by, and it's these stereotypes that help us form associative chains. As in, 'a hot and bright item is dangerous'. It instantly triggers the image of yourself, barely six years old, reaching your weak little hands for the red-hot kettle on the kitchen top, a mere three seconds before life teaches you your first and very important lesson.

This was why, as soon as I'd heard the skies being rent apart, I was instantly transported back to the rocky maze, facing the pale monster with clusters of tentacles for fingers and a ravenous toothy gob in place of its belly.

A feverish shiver ran over my body. I froze. My intuition hadn't failed me. This world was indeed similar to Atrain.

Admittedly, Arts was just as scared. The moment she'd heard the sound, she crouched in a childish attempt to cower, as if afraid someone might notice her.

And she hadn't even seen those monsters yet.

"We've gotta run," she told me, anxious.

"You won't run very far from those things," I said, remembering my last encounter with the swift pale monster. "They *will* catch up with you. The only thing we can possibly do is prepare to fight them. Just keep in mind those bastards are very agile."

“You want us to wait for them right here?”

“Oh no,” I replied as I looked over the area.

We needed to find a strategically advantageous defense position. Which still left open the next question: how on earth would two people — okay, two Players — resist a bunch of otherworldly monsters immune to both physical and magic damage? If I remembered rightly, even my plasma gun hadn’t discouraged it.

“Over there,” I finally said, pointing deep into the forest where its blue and green foliage parted, revealing terraced black cliffs. Not very big ones but still a decent cover from the terrible claps of thunder ripping the sky apart.

We barged through the undergrowth, fighting tree branches out of our way, toward what felt like a safe cluster of rocks. They weren’t very far, either: barely a hundred feet from where we were.

Imagine my desperation when I’d discovered that the cliffs provided no cover whatsoever. Not even a shallow gorge worth speaking of — just some shattered rocks littering the ground below the sheer cliffs. Their only redeeming feature was a wide ledge at about my shoulders’ high, which you could climb, in theory, and... and do what? Watch your death approach, from the first row?

Arts touched my shoulder. “You hear that?”

Usually strong, she was now a sorry sight. Her habitual confidence and pluck were gone. She was shivering. No wonder: there’s nothing worse than the fear of the unknown. The problem was, once she’d seen the otherworldly monsters, she wouldn’t feel any better.

But now I too shuddered at the distant echo of a scream, barely audible but fateful as the approaching nightfall.

How far had the gnomes managed to advance since we'd parted ways? They must have gone quite far — far enough for the forest to dampen their screams even if they were being skinned alive. And still we could hear them. We knew they were already dead — or in the process of dying.

"How far did they go, do you know?" Arts asked in unison with my thoughts.

I shrugged. I was caught in the path of a sinister foreboding which careened toward us like an avalanche. If only we'd been near a city or a Gatehouse!

I reached into my inventory for the crude sword we'd found in the ruins of Vieltplain. Still, no miracle happened. As soon as my hand closed around it, the sword slid out of my grip and dropped to the ground. I might just as well be trying to scoop up a blob of mercury.

I touched the sword, sending it back into my inventory. How ironic. I had in my possession a sword capable of killing otherworldly monsters — but I couldn't as much as lay my hands on it.

My knees wavered. And again. Time after time. It took me a while to realize that my legs weren't the problem. It was the ground itself quivering.

Then the familiar clangor of chains added to the noise. Now I knew. The troll must have decided to use the commotion and flee, proving he wasn't that stupid after all. And judging by the trembling of the earth getting stronger, he could be here any moment.

Even better, he was our only chance of survival, and we could use it.

"The troll! We've gotta stop him!" I shouted to Arts at the top of my lungs even though she was standing right next to me.

“Why?” she shouted back, shielding herself behind me.

“He’s gonna pull us out of here!”

The good news was, we made it. We took cover just as the troll came into view. He bounded into the open, his chains crashing through tree branches like battle flails.

I readied my fingers, prepared to cast the spell. The bad news was, I had no idea how I was supposed to stop this half-ton behemoth who had no intention of stopping whatsoever.

“Hope you know what you’re doing,” Arts said.

Her own spell was impressive. Singeing me with heat, a high wall of fire rose in the troll’s way, much taller than the monster himself. I peered through the tongues of flame, watching the troll’s face change from scared to petrified. Arts must have known these creatures well and knew exactly which buttons to press.

I unhesitantly cast Talking to Mysterious Creatures. If it had worked with the beholder, I saw no reason for it not to work on a troll. True, he might be slightly higher in the magical creatures’ hierarchy, but it wasn’t as if I had much choice.

A wisp of vapor escaped my fingers and rammed through the wall of fire, hitting the troll. He twitched his head but didn’t respond to my contact attempt. Or rather, he did growl something but I failed to understand what he wanted to say. Which meant that the spell hadn’t worked.

Still, I had no intention of giving up so easily. This green-skinned monster was our only chance of survival. If he’d been fast enough to escape the otherworldly creatures, he could do it again, with some passengers this time.

Still, I wasn’t doing a very good job of it. My second attempt to cast the spell wrenched a threatening growl from the troll who even started forward as if wondering if lunging at me through the wall of flames was worth it.

Those two attempts had stripped me of 200 mana points. Although it wasn’t even 30% of what I had, it wasn’t a good start.

Still, I continued to cast the spell with a doggedness worthy of a better cause. If little strokes can fell great oaks, a desperate Player just might get his message across a troll’s hard skull.

You’ve created a new spell: Talking to Semi-Sentient Creatures.
Your Creation skill has increased to level 2.
Your Sorcery skill has increased to level 7.

I barely glanced over the spell’s description. I knew what it was supposed to do, anyway. The only thing that interested me was its cost.

Talking to Semi-Sentient Creatures (Sorcery). Allows you to understand and negotiate with semi-sentient beings.
Cost: 200 mana
Duration: 30 seconds

That was a very good thing, because so far, I’d only been charged 100 mana for basically this same spell. Which meant I still had one more attempt left. What wasn’t so good was that the earlier Sorcery spells allowed me to actually control the creatures in question. Now, however, the Game suggested that I tried to *negotiate*.

“Hi!” I shouted. In the course of the day, I seemed to have developed a very bad habit of yelling at people. “My name is Serge. I’m your friend.”

“Friend?” the troll replied with sincere surprise. “Friend no make fire. Brychr no like fire.”

“Arts, put it out,” I whispered.

The wall of flames instantly collapsed like a crumbling vine.

Brychr took a step forward and leaned down a little, studying me. Can’t say I felt comfortable being so close to his yellowish fangs and his ginormous nose greedily sniffing the air.

“Brychr will die. White death will kill Brychr.”

“No, don’t say that! Brychr is very fast. You managed to escape the otherworldly monsters, and the gnomes didn’t. You could pick us up and keep on running.”

“Brychr tired. Brychr will die. They will kill Brychr,” he kept repeating.

“Shit!” I cussed in the good old human language.

“Whassup?” Arts asked.

I waved her away, trying to urgently come up with a new plan seeing as my old one had just bitten the dust.

“Brychr, can you hear me? No one’s gonna die today. You hear me?”

I was worried he might tell me to get lost and just continue on his marathon against time. Who would have thought they got tired so quickly? Still, Brychr followed me, reluctantly at first, casting grim glances at Arts as he must have worked out she was the one who’d cast the fire wall.

We walked back to the black cliffs. But this time, there was only one thing that interested me there: namely, the flat ledge which I’d earlier designated as a vantage point to watch the monster slay us.

Now, however, the tables had turned.

I climbed the ledge and let the Gatekeeper’s sword drop from my inventory onto the ledge. I didn’t do a very good job of it, so I had to use my Katzbalger to push it closer to the edge. I didn’t want to touch it with my hands for fear of the Game once again protesting against my illegal use of the weapon.

Finally, after lots of huffing and puffing, I managed to do it. The bulk of the sword rested on the ledge, with only the tip of the blade protruding about ten inches over the edge.

I cast Talking to Semi-Sentient Creatures and tried to explain my idea to the troll, telling him what exactly he had to do once our enemies showed up.

It wasn’t easy. At some point, I even thought it wasn’t going to work due to the differences in our cultures. Still, in the end Brychr nodded. He picked up a hefty boulder and threw it onto the ledge, pinning the sword down. He did it so clumsily that I barely managed to jump off, warily watching the sword.

Still, it seemed to have worked. The blade was now securely trapped under a bunch of rocks, its tip sticking out a little. I tried to force it aside with my Katzbalger but couldn’t.

Excellent. All we had to do was wait for our slayers to show up.

And show up they did. Two pale-skinned monsters with elongated skulls appeared on the road, running on the balls of their feet flailing their impossibly long arms in the air. I don’t think they even looked in front of themselves.

Then both stopped, raised their heads and started sniffing, like hunting dogs chasing after a wounded rabbit. Mind you, the ‘rabbits’ were standing right next to them, one of them big enough to pass for a Christmas turkey, making it impossible for them to miss us.

Then an interesting thing happened.

“The big one is mine,” one of the monsters wheezed without opening his mouth.

Both of them went for us. Their respective attack methods differed though. The first monster used his long finger-like tentacles to push himself off the ground which gave him an instant lead, while the other leapt after him, his spindly legs sprawling.

It took me a while to work out their strategy. Apparently, one of them aimed for the bigger prey while the other must have decided to take care of the smaller fish.

Even a tenderizing hammer would have made less noise than the monster as he rammed the troll. His nauseatingly long “fingers” began to stretch even longer, entwining their victim. The toothy mouth opened on his belly.

All I heard was a happy slurp, followed by an inhuman (predictably so) scream of pain from the troll trying to fight the monster off. At least now I knew the reason for the gnomes’ earlier screaming.

Still, I didn’t have the time to check on him. I could only hope that he’d understood me. What else was I supposed to do? I didn’t have enough mana to cast another Talking with Creatures to explain my reasons to him. Besides, by now we were too busy having fun too.

“Arts, use your staff!”

But she’d already worked it out herself, sending a string of fireballs at the approaching monster. He managed to dodge a couple — after all, they were noticeably slower than the creature — but failed to avoid a third one which hit him directly in his belly.

The monster lost his momentum and took a couple of wobbly steps but promptly recovered. I got the impression it wasn’t a fireball that had hit him but a toy balloon filled with water.

I drew my Katzbalger, bracing myself to confront him.

Well, what did you want me to do? I had no mana left. My Avatar wasn’t much help here, either. Speed was my only hope: both mine and the poor troll’s. I could hear him growl, still struggling behind me. It sounded like a nice scuffle they were having there. Shame I couldn’t turn to get a look.

Arts kept launching fireballs at him right up to the moment he reached me. Then she stopped, for fear of singeing my own sorry ass. I wasn’t a big fan of such epilation methods.

Just like in chess, our white opponents had had the first move, advancing for a win.

A bunch of tentacles entwined my leg, tugging me down. I found myself on the ground under the monster, facing a mouthful of strong sharp teeth. I smelled his rancid breath which stank like a bagful of rotten spuds. Strands of drool were dribbling from his jaws.

[∞]

I dodged to the left. My Katzbalger drew a broad arc as it fell onto him, chopping off several of his tentacles.

Hie belly opened in a soundless scream. The monster twitched as if electrocuted. I tried to deal him another blow and even took a swing — only for my sword to meet with thin air.

At least I managed to check up on the troll. He wasn’t doing very well, either. By then, the swiftest monster had already enmeshed the troll’s

body with his tentacles which had grown to incredible lengths as if they were elastic. To make things worse, the monster had pinned poor Brychr to the cliff right next to the protruding sword.

Had I really overestimated the troll's intelligence?

My back erupted in pain as a powerful blow nailed me to the ground. It was my own opponent, apparently offended by me admiring his companion's fighting skills and unwilling to wait for me to resume our own duel.

[∞]

I dodged to the left and took another swing — to no avail. Or should I say, I did manage to avoid his blow but failed to dish out my own. What's more, in the two seconds it had taken us to size each other up, the missing fingers on his wounded hand had regrown.

What the hell was that now? The dude had enhanced regeneration!

Then something bizarre happened. He spat something at me. Just like that. He collected saliva in his toothy mouth and doused me with it. I'd expected anything — but this llama-like behavior was beyond me. Where were his manners?

Even more interestingly, my body ceased to obey me. My foot took a step forward while my arms clung to my sides. My drenched trench coat stuck to my body, cramping my style.

It didn't take me very long to put two and two together.

[∞]

This time, I'd managed to dodge the venomous spittle. But unfortunately, Arts hadn't. I watched her drop to the ground, eyes agog. The

monster promptly worked it out and went for her, ignoring me entirely.

Oh well. If I was about to die, I might just as well do it in style.

[∞]

In a single bound, I leapt upon the monster and stabbed him in the guts with my Katzbalger.

Or rather, I tried to. Because it didn't work out. His reaction times were absolutely out of this world, if you'll excuse the pun.

His tentacles rolled around my arms, forcing them asunder, his giant jaws looming over me, opening yet again. Had it not been for his dagger-size teeth, I might have tumbled straight into his belly.

I didn't care anymore whether I'd live or die. True, I still had another time rewind left — but what was the point? It was either me or Arts — and I'd seen too many of my friends die just lately. I could only hope that I was so full of shit that I would give him a good dose of indigestion. He was already shivering, anyway, as if about to puke.

Then suddenly he let go of me and turned toward the troll, studying him with his filmy eyes.

Because that was a sight worth seeing.

Brychr had done it. In the best boxing tradition, he'd first exhausted his own opponent, then knocked him out with a single punch. Figuratively speaking, of course. He'd simply grabbed his monster, turned him round, and promptly impaled him on the Gatekeeper's sword sticking out of the rocks.

The monster should have told us he was allergic to Inturia — because he died quickly and without much ado, reduced to a nauseating puddle of

jelly.

This was when my own opponent had turned toward him, studying him with his filmy eyes. A staring game ensued between him and the troll who was nursing his rent belly.

It lasted for about three seconds. Then the monster used his tentacles to push his body off the ground and scarpered off in the direction he'd come from.

It took me another half a minute to shake off my stupor. Grinning like an idiot, I gave him a thumbs-up. That was all I could do. I didn't have enough mana to communicate with him.

Arts hurried to heal his ravaged belly. His wound looked awful even after she'd stopped the bleeding. Still, the troll made it clear he was feeling much better already.

Wish I could say the same about the sword. It had taken me a good fifteen minutes of sign language to explain to him that we couldn't leave the sword behind. Finally, the troll managed to roll the boulder aside, allowing me to retrieve the Gatekeeper's gift he'd so conveniently left at our disposal. I had no intention of parting with it any longer.

After another hour's walk, my mana had restored enough to allow me and Brychr to finally have a conversation — which admittedly proved very interesting. By then, the otherworldly thunder had stopped pounding in the heavens, and we too had calmed down somewhat.

"Brychr surprised," the troll admitted.

"Why, what's up?" I asked.

"Brychr see signs before his eyes. Brychr is like shaman now. He can see signs."

Upon hearing this, I very nearly dropped on the spot. After asking him a few more questions, I managed to work out that he indeed must have inherited some kind of ability from the otherworldly monster. That couldn't make him a bona fide Player, of course, because he was only a semi-sentient creature, not a commoner even. We couldn't even discuss it properly because the ability's thirty-second time window didn't last very long.

Later, I made another failed attempt to find out what had happened to him. By then, Brychr had lost all interest in our earlier conversation. Judging by his blank stare, he was busy sorting through the "signs", whatever they were supposed to mean. Somehow I doubted that trolls had a proper language.

After another couple of hours, the forest parted, revealing mountains seemingly kissing the sky. Brychr waved his hands in a negative way, refusing to mount the trail leading uphill. He gave me the thumbs-up and something resembling a smile, then continued along the forest's edge, rattling his chains.

"Over there," Arts said, pointing upward.

Then again, my Observational Skills had already allowed me to make out the spires of some squat towers lurking amid the mountain tops.

Okay, let's go there then.

Still, we'd barely managed to reach the base of the mountain less than half an hour later when a whole horde of grim-faced gnomes — oops, sorry, I meant Qirdians — turned up on the path with crossbows at the ready, wearing dusty capes the color of the local stone. Considering there were at least fifteen of them, I suddenly felt the urge to be on my best behavior.

"Haisa," the most sullen one grumbled. An old white scar crossed his face from his earlobe to his throat. His lank black hair could have done with a good shampooing.

“Human language, please,” Arts and I said almost in unison.

“My name is Bordur. The strangers must obey Bordur. They must follow him.”

“Yes, of course,” I said, snatching the diplomatic initiative back from him. “If you showed us to the nearest Gatehouse, it would be greatly appreciated.”

“We can do that,” he said with a smile that promised nothing good. “But first the strangers will have to visit our prison.”

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Chapter 6

IN EVERY COMPANY, be it a bunch of teenagers or a swish gentleman's club, there's always someone who constantly screws up. There're no exceptions. If you think there's no such person in your entourage, I got some bad news for you. Take me, for instance. I'd just realized that all our problems were exclusively my own fault.

Don't get me wrong: I did make a couple of attempts to rewind time, seeing as my supply of charges had already been topped up in the time it had taken us to travel from the black cliffs to the mountains. Still, none of my tactics had worked: neither coercion nor threats even. The gnomes took us straight to jail, not giving us even the chance to take a look at the town.

Who the hell treats occasional tourists like that? I'll never come back here again!

As for the town itself, it was admittedly a bit funny. The size of an overgrown fortress, it bore all the signs of man's (oh, sorry, gnome's) struggle with Nature. The surrounding rock face was studded with niches reclaimed from the stone, each of them accommodating a small house with tiny windows, squat and pot-bellied just like the Qirdians themselves. The sole relatively broad street was traversed by narrow crooked lanes which threaded their way up and down. The few Qirdians we met cast grim glances after us, confirming my suspicion that they weren't very fond of newcomers.

Our journey ended by the biggest and most impressive of the buildings: a large round tower tapering up. I could make out a line of long

narrow windows at the top, very much like arrowslits, behind which one could see the occasional light and the flitting shadows of individuals — the guards, most likely.

This must have been the residence of the local governor — but admittedly, it looked more like a donjon bristling with spears and capable of locking down at a moment's notice to repel an enemy attack. In the surrounding dusk, in the faint light of the few torches, the tower appeared to be as one with the mountain and equally unassailable.

Still, we didn't head for its brightly lit vaulted entrance. Bordur shoved me to the left, forcing us to skirt the donjon until we came to a stone building with barred windows.

Once again I tried to explain that this was a mistake. Still, a dozen crossbows pointing at various parts of my anatomy promptly dampened my ardor.

Okay. A man's got to do what a man's got to do.

The prison cell turned out to be small, its creature comforts consisting of a chipped chamber pot and two sacks of damp straw. Just regular straw, not even the "smart" orthopedic kind. After one night spent in its dubious luxury, I already felt as if I'd been half-beaten to death.

But the worst thing about it was that we were wasting time here. We had no idea how long they might want to keep us here.

"This road might take us to Warwth, they said," I grumbled mockingly as I paced the cell like a furious tiger in his cage. "We might find another Gatekeeper there, they said..."

Not that I was so mad with what had happened (although admittedly I was), but I was desperate to take a leak. It wasn't even that I was too squeamish to use the chamber pot — no, the thing that was stopping me was the presence of Arts.

“Actually, it was your idea,” she said. “I did suggest we wait for the Gatekeeper back in Vieltplain.”

“Yeah right. We’d have been dead meat by now. Those monsters would have ripped us apart.”

“Then I don’t know what your problem is.”

Arts was coolness incarnate. Had she ever even experienced the call of nature? The thought made me even angrier.

Luckily, the rattle of the locks put an end to our impending argument. The door opened. A torch flickered outside, casting a shadow over the figure of our yesterday’s captor.

“Bordur will take the strangers to the Eparch,” he said.

“With great pleasure. I you could just take my friend out, please, and leave me alone in the cell for a minute?”

It took him a while to figure out what I wanted from him. I was obliged to lean a little closer to him, very nearly earning myself a hearty whack as a preventive measure, in order to explain the nature of my personal problem to him. Only then did he relent and motioned to the guards to take Arts out, while he stayed put watching me. He must have thought this to be some kind of ruse.

Never mind. I’d been to enough gents’ in my lifetime. Much to Bordur’s surprise, I managed to fill the pot almost to the top. Well, he should have known better than to have left a big pitcher of water in the cell last night.

At least I was in good spirits on my return journey to the tower, even despite Arts’ quip about the cell’s walls being paper thin.

Not that I cared very much. In the daylight, the town appeared to be even more interesting. Of course, there wasn't much sun here, obscured as it was by all the mountain peaks. But at least the town didn't seem so gloomy. If anything, it reminded me of the set of a fantasy movie, as if the director was about to appear together with the cameraman and clapboard.

The only thing that alarmed me a little was a minor tremor, about two or three on the Richter scale. At first, I just thought I was staggering. Still, the meaningful expression on Arts' face meant she felt the same.

Which made Bordur's behavior even more unusual. Throughout the whole journey, he was cordiality itself. He even managed a chuckle when he'd seen me trip and very nearly fall flat on my face as I gawked at the house roofs. When he'd sensed the tremors, he simply gave me another dig in the ribs. "Move it," he grumbled, then fell silent again.

I was beginning to have a very bad feeling about it all.

The donjon's interior did nothing to reassure me. I'd half-expected to see a majestic reception hall lined with an escort of guards, just like in fantasy books. However, the place was in turmoil. Crossbowmen were running back and forth, shouting and yelling at each other.

Six gnomes stood aside from the rest, looking rather out of place. They were dirty and unarmed, their clothes in tatters. Judging by the fact that they were flanked by pikemen, these poor beggars were not there of their own free will, either.

The throne, if I may call it so, was carved out of stone and stood on a modest pedestal. It was empty — but it wasn't too hard for me to identify the Eparch amid all the armed warriors present. He was the only one who didn't bear arms.

Also, he wasn't dressed for the battlefield in his velvet waistcoat, snow-white shirt (which showed off his impressive biceps), a pair of

strangely-cut pants and low tapered shoes. A large crimson beret graced the head of this local would-be trendsetter. I was speechless.

Then again, we shouldn't be judging the book by its cover. The Eparch turned out to be the only Player amongst all Qirdians. An ***Architect***, to be precise.

He too noticed us almost immediately. Still, he continued to talk and give orders while casting occasional glances in our direction.

Having finished, he sauntered over to the throne, sat on it and nodded to Bordur who then escorted Arts and myself to their ruler.

"Greetings, stranger."

"I'd have gladly greeted you too had it not been for the cold reception we received from your people. Do you throw all of your visitors into jail?"

"No. Only criminals."

"So what crime had we committed?"

The Eparch smiled as he waved at one of the gnomes: a hunched-up puny old man with a crooked nose who stood nearby.

The man took a few steps forward and announced in a very deep and officious tone reminiscent of national radio broadcasters voices of old.

"The strangers are being accused of conspiring with the local outlawed fauna to brutally murder Cobant's group, slaughter the entire population of the Vieltplain village and burn it to the ground."

Had I been someone else and had I just heard these kinds of accusations aimed at myself, I would have unhesitantly sent myself to the electric chair. At least they weren't accusing me of the 1965 Indonesian mass killings. Still, that wasn't a reason to celebrate, either.

“We can do it in a different way though,” the Eparch went on. “You can fight a monster to the death. If you come out on top, we’ll waiver all accusations against you.”

“And what is this monster?” I asked just for the sake of saying something. I had the impression that we didn’t have any other option, anyway.

The Eparch waved his hand again. The old boy, who by then had already returned to his place in the crowd, took a step forward again. Aha! I worked it out. He seemed to be some kind of the “voice of the nation” here.

“Warwth was founded by our valorous warriors in the very heart of the Burhthner Mountain. Ours is a mighty city which throughout its history has never been captured. Still, a few years later, its denizens discovered something terrible. The Qirdians weren’t the sole inhabitants of these mountains. An ancient monster had awoken in the mountain’s depths, known as Wioulf: a terrible predator feeding on flesh alone. So the wise first Eparch of Warwth reasoned that you could cohabit even with such a terrible monster if you gave him what he needed.”

On hearing this, a lump grew in my throat. Now I knew the role of the six ragged gnomes standing aside from the rest, their eyes filled with desperation. They were condemned to be food for the mountain monster.

“This is how it came about that twice a year, Wioulf would wake up and we would buy him off by offering him the most notorious evil-doers and other criminals who’d been sentenced to death.”

Yeah, right, pull the other one. They’d already categorized Arts and myself with them, as well, believing us to be some kind of part-time Nazi overlords — while our only fault was trying to use the Gatehouse to get out of this backwater.

Interestingly, Arts seemed to be of the same opinion. “Even if they knew about the monsters’ attack on Vieltplain,” she whispered to me, “they can’t have known about the death of Cobant and his troops before our arrival. They must have sent some scouts down that way to double-check our story.”

By the way, I’d already worked that out. I just refused to believe in the efficiency of their “secret service”. Most likely, they’d simply tweaked the truth to fit their agenda. Or, as we say in Russia, ‘give me a man, and I’ll find what to charge him with’. So that’s what they’d done: they’d found us, very conveniently suiting their purposes.

Still, I needed to know the answer to the most important question that kept bugging me:

“Why are you doing this?”

The old man cut himself short. The Eparch cast me a surprised glance.

I was obliged to expand on the subject:

“We’re Players, aren’t we? You can’t feed us to the monster. The moment we die, he’ll only have a pile of dust to feast on.”

I could tell that I’d hit the nail on the head. The Eparch winced as if I’d brought the aforementioned chamber pot right up to his nose.

“As I’ve just told you,” he said, “if you defeat the monster and come back alive, any accusations against you will be wiped out. I never renege on my word. That’s enough. Take them away.”

Bordur gave me another poke in the ribs. Bastard! If he kept doing it, I’d end up with a nice big bruise there.

Still, that got me thinking. It just didn’t match up with what I already knew. He wanted to tell me that all this time, the gnomes had been fattening up the underground monster, only to have it slaughtered — and by Players of all people, whom they really shouldn’t cross? That wasn’t very clever, was it?

I needed more info. But how was I supposed to get it?

Much to my surprise, they didn’t take us outside. Instead, we followed a whole bunch of guards across the hall, then continued down a spiral staircase. Of course we could try to resist — but what would that all amount to? We only had two potential escape routes, and one would still lead us down here, toward the subterranean monster, which was admittedly a dubious pleasure. Alternatively, we would have to fight our way back up which was clearly a losing battle.

I gave Bordur another downward look. Grim as he was, he was actually quite neutral to me, not bearing any racist prejudices considering himself a higher being and myself an inferior “untermensch”. Plus he was also a commoner. So it just might work, you never know.

I turned to him, employing the strongest argument from my Persuasion Skills arsenal. “You know, Bordur, don’t you, that whoever is sentenced to death is always granted their last wish?”

“So what if I do?” he grumbled.

Excellent. The fact that he hadn’t told me to stuff it was already a good thing.

“I wouldn’t ask you to release us or help us escape. But if you could tell us something about that monster, we might have a better chance of defeating him.”

His bushy eyebrows knotted even closer. He lowered his voice and replied almost unhesitantly without even slowing down.

“Bordur never seen Wioulf. We can sense him awaken, that’s all.”

“Because the mountain starts to tremble?” I second-guessed, remembering what had just happened.

“Yes. Wioulf only used to wake up once a year. Then it was twice a year. And now it’s happening more often than ever. We’ve even run out of prisoners. So our Eparch, may the Gods bless his wisdom,” he said sarcastically, “ordered us to stop all the vagabonds that were hanging about the city and throw them in jail.”

The way he said it spoke volumes about what he really thought about their Eparch’s “wisdom”. Still, he refrained from commenting on it, making it clear who was the smart cookie here.

“And of course, it didn’t help,” I prompted.

“The more we feed him, the hungrier he gets.”

“Why won’t you try to kill him?”

“We did try. We sent our best hird of ten pikemen and twenty crossbowmen down there. But nobody even came back. That’s when our Eparch, may the Gods bless his wisdom, decided to use Players instead.”

“What, hire them?”

“Warwth was never known for its riches. We’re a tough bunch and we earn everything through our own labor.”

“Aha, I see. There’s no money, but you just keep hanging on in there. So that’s why your Eparch decided to treat Players the same way he treats Vagabonds, by capturing them and sending them to the monster in the hope that they just might kill him?”

“May the Gods bless his resolve,” Bordur all but spat out. “Still, we all swore an oath of allegiance to our city. As long as we’re alive, we can’t disobey him, unless the city falls.”

“I’m afraid,” I said, “your Eparch’s managerial talents might bring this city to its knees.”

I continued to walk in silence. He’d given me plenty of food for thought.

So! There was something living under the mountain — apparently big and powerful enough to have killed thirty gnomes in one single battle. Said gnomes may have been commoners but they were all warriors nevertheless. Twenty crossbowmen and ten pikemen, the mind boggles!

I didn’t really have enough time to think over it in depth. The further we went, the darker it became. The crackling of the flaming torches mixed with the soft patter of our footsteps. The thick black smoke was reminiscent of a gloomy funeral service about to begin.

The vagabond prisoners walking in front began to sob softly. The guards’ hands began to shake. All of them were apparently scared witless of what was about to happen.

Finally, we came to a large opening with a barred entryway leading into the caves. Each steel bar was as thick as my arm, which promised nothing good. What kind of creature would require this level of protection?

The prisoners’ sobbing grew louder. One of the vagabonds tried to attack an accompanying guard — but a few well-placed blows on the head managed to beat some sense back into him. He was now sitting on the ground, his body shuddering.

Bordur walked over to him and made a small incision in his arm.

Blood dripped onto the stone floor. Bordur walked through the prisoners' group, repeating the procedure to all of them. Apparently, this was a bait to help the monster find his food quickly.

When our turn came, Bordur surprised me again. He took me by the arm and ran his knife across it — but he did so with the flat of the blade, leaving no cut, only a smudge of other people's blood. I watched him doing the same to Arts.

It could have been the Eparch's order, just to give Players an extra chance — or it could be Bordur's personal intent. In any case, I fully appreciated his gesture. This gave us a small advantage in the game where the aces weren't stacked in our favor.

It took six guards to lift the steel grate. With a nauseating screech, the bars inched up, revealing the cave's macabre innards. Somewhere below lurked the carnivorous monster waiting for nothing else but the gnomes to deliver his next meal on a silver platter.

Still, my natural bolshevism protested against me becoming his breakfast. The now-motionless Arts would probably have agreed with me.

The guards very nicely pointed their pikes at us, urging us on to our last and most exciting adventure. The only choice we had was either impale ourselves on their spearheads or step forward.

And this is exactly how the self-preservation mechanism works: when you're offered the choice between an instant and painless death right now and a torturous one but delayed, we all tend to choose the latter. Because we all try to delay the unavoidable.

So we stepped into the cave. A cold, shivery trill ran down my spine.

Much to my surprise, the place wasn't completely dark. Clusters of shimmering purple mushrooms grew at the walls' base further away from the entrance, their caps gleaming as if this was some crazy doctor's surgery,

giving you a dose of UV treatment. After about fifty feet, the entryway began to snake in every direction, forking into different-size tunnels.

That was all I'd had the time to see.

The grate thundered back into place behind us. The rocks began to tremble underfoot.

Wioulf had heard the signal and was now hurrying up for his breakfast.

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Chapter 7

HARD TIMES CREATE STRONG MEN, strong men create good times, good times create weak men, and weak men create hard times.

It seemed to me that this adage described the entire history of the city of Warwth, from its founding as a unassailable mountain fortress to its citizens offering human sacrifices to a mysterious subterranean monster.

The poor vagabond victims who'd been brought here with us served as a prime example of the city's weakness. They clung to the bars, as if the proximity of the donjon could help them in some way. But the cave behind the bars was pitch black as the guards had already left the dungeon, unwilling to witness the gory spectacle.

Talk about weak. One's life is worth fighting for tooth and claw — and even a sword if you've got one. Take me, for instance. I'd already drawn both my Katzbalger and my Moon Steel dagger, ready to face their monster.

His size was anyone's guess. The cave appeared to be quite big, at least twelve feet high, if it wasn't more, and its width even larger. Besides the main tunnel which led steeply downwards, there were other ones too which joined the central one rather erratically, often ending in dead ends.

Still, Arts continued to pull me forward along this underground termites' nest, away from the sacrificial gnomes.

“Do you mind?” I said. “Aren’t we heading straight into the hands of that Wolf of theirs?”

“He’s not Wolf. It’s Wioulf. “Oulf” means “three” in the Qirdian language.”

“Finally your Linguistics skill has come in handy just as you’re about to snuff it.”

“Having the skill isn’t the only way you can learn a language. I just picked it up as I went along. Over here,” Arts said. She checked yet another tunnel and dragged me in behind herself.

This one was also a dead end barely lit by a few clusters of the UV toadstools. But it was at least fifty feet long, narrowing as it rose.

Arts did away with the mushrooms with a cruelty uncharacteristic of her, scorching their little purple lanterns with her staff. I fully understood that darkness was a young couple’s best friend but I still wasn’t sure what she was up to.

“Are you gonna help me or not?” she said, turning to face me. “Just make it quick and try to be quiet.”

“Don’t teach your granny to suck eggs,” I replied, drawing her to the very back of the tunnel which was so low we were obliged to stoop by the safety of its farthest wall.

Then I cast Wave of Fire.

For a moment, everything around us became bright and incredibly hot. Admittedly, the heat dissipated almost instantly, replaced by a humid chill.

Having reached the main tunnel, the surging flames expired. If I remembered rightly, the spell had 70 pt. damage. Which proved more than

enough for the mushrooms, plunging the little tunnel into pitch blackness.

“Keep quiet,” Arts mouthed. “If this is the monster that I think it is, we’d better try to stay undetected.”

“How about you share your ideas with me?”

“I will, but not quite yet. Can you hear it?”

She didn’t have to ask. You’d have to be deaf and blind to miss it.

The rocks began to tremble, announcing the arrival of the subterranean monster. Or maybe a monsteress, as the case may be. I hadn’t had a chance to check, you know.

I’d been mixing with too many rare critters just lately, and not of the peaceful kind, either. Each of them seemed to have been bent on devouring me, or at least on biting half my head off just to see my reaction.

Still, the yet-invisible behemoth that was lumbering his way up the tunnel instilled a mixed feeling in me: a cross between fear and yet-undeserved respect. This is the kind of thing you feel when coming across a super heavyweight boxer: you just wish you could melt into the woodwork as you squeeze your way past. Judging by the sounds and the slight tremors that permeated the cave, the creature was rather like an oversized tank hurrying to get to the poor victims.

As for the latter, they were still clinging to the bars, quaking in their boots. I very much disagreed with their combat tactics which consisted of them just standing there waiting to die. They could have at least tried to find a hiding place, seeing as there were plenty of little niches around. Now, however, especially considering the smell of blood emitted by their wounds, all they needed was a neon sign saying, ‘Dinner’s on the table’.

In actual fact, the giant beast didn’t seem to be in a hurry at all. Moreover, once he’d caught up with me and Arts, so that only one wall was

separating us, the monster fell silent. I could hear his labored wheezing as his elongated shadow flitted through the main tunnel.

The heavy stench of carrion assaulted my nose. Dammit. A zombie monster was the last thing we needed.

My heart began to race.

At exactly that moment, the creature decided to peer into our cozy little nook. I thanked my lucky stars for Arts' thinking of genociding the luminous toadstools. Not only because the monster couldn't see us now — but also because I couldn't see him, either, otherwise I would have fainted on the spot.

An enormous serpentine head was staring at us from the main tunnel. How enormous exactly?

For some reason, the *Anaconda* movie starring J Lo came to mind.

I froze, afraid of making a move. To the best of my knowledge, snakes and reptiles couldn't see very well. And I'd just managed to lay my hands on that Chameleon ability back in Atrain. Which gave me a 50% advantage when blending into the background, if I remembered rightly, as long as I didn't move. Not a big deal, but still a decent chance to remain unnoticed.

Still, I had my doubts about the monster's physiology. What was it Arts had said about the significance of number three in his name? Also, the sounds of the approaching giant were far removed from the slithering of a snake. In which case, as Arnie Schwarzenegger used to say in one of his films, it must have been "one ugly motherfucker".

Wioulf wasn't too eager to indulge my curiosity. I could understand him. What was our dark nook compared to all the tasty bloody steaks sobbing for mercy just a few steps further? Which was probably why his viperous head promptly slid back into the tunnel.

Did I feel sorry for the poor gnomes clinging to the bars? Oh yes I did, and quite badly too. I'm not a statue with a heart of stone. I'm only human, after all. Taking into account the crookedness of the local justice, anyone could have ended up here, even a saint unfortunate enough to be passing this city. The poor guys just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Still, I felt a whole bunch sorrier for myself — and Arts. By now, I'd gradually come to grips with the thought that I couldn't save the world, no matter how much I tried. Trying to right all wrongs could backfire equally badly — because for every action there is a reaction, sometimes infinitely more powerful.

Did it make me an ego tripper? Yes, it did. A Player can't be anything but. Provided he wants to live.

On a rational level, I knew all this. Still, when I heard the first screams not so very far from us, I startled and clenched my teeth.

A slurping sound followed, like chomping on a piece of raw meat. Arts' fingers tore at my shoulder, as if she was afraid I might do something stupid.

She didn't have to. I fell into a state akin to a stupor. I could hear the sounds of the gnomes being ripped apart barely a few feet from where I was standing — but I could do jack about it.

But at least I now knew that Arts had been right. Judging by the sounds, they were made by at least three different heads.

The monster was dining with abandon, oblivious to everything else. Soon after, the screaming subsided, replaced by the sounds of gnomish bones snapping and flesh being flayed off the bodies as the behemoth was breaking his fast after his long slumber.

No idea how long it lasted — most likely, an eternity. Finally, the ground began to tremble once again as Wioulf lumbered off, heading back down to his lair, sated and unhurried.

When the sounds had distanced enough for us to regain our voices, Arts gingerly walked down to the tunnel's end and peeked out, then waved for me to approach. Her sangfroid amazed me sometimes.

"Serge, you'd better not look."

Still, it was already too late. My feet brought me to the bars on their own accord.

No idea what I'd expected to see there. Did I still hope none of it had happened? Yeah right. It did, and it did so with a vengeance. The reality surpassed my wildest expectations.

You'd think it was the surgery of a senile transplantologist. Distorted limbs, broken at unnatural angles and torn apart, littered the floor in scraps of flesh. My boots squelched over pools of blood.

A lump grew in my throat. My chest was on fire. My temples began to throb.

"What did I say?" Arts quipped, catching up with me. "You'd better start thinking about how to get us out of here."

"I *am* thinking," I replied as calmly as I could, trying to suppress the fierce shaking of my body. "Two bodies are missing."

"What?"

"Look for yourself. This monster didn't devour them completely. Apparently, he's physically not capable of swallowing a whole gnome. They're just too bulky for him. He would just bite bits off them..." I paused and closed my eyes, then continued without opening them, "If you try to

match all the remaining limbs and bits of clothing, you can see there're only four bodies here. Admittedly pretty badly chewed up but still there're only four. Two are missing."

"You're right!" Arts exclaimed in amazement. "Wioulf must have taken the other two back with him! But why?"

"That's a million dollar question," I said, turning away from the gory scene. "You'd better tell me what we should do now."

"The guards are bound to come back sooner or later. Just to—" she paused, giving me a long look before concluding, "just to clean it all up, I suppose."

"The big question is, just when will they turn up."

"Another option would be for us to try and investigate the cave. If Wioulf has stuffed himself full, he's bound to fall asleep. If we're careful enough, we just might slip past him. There might just be a couple of exit tunnels there if we're lucky."

I shrugged. "Or, if he's indeed asleep, we could just kill him."

"We could," Arts agreed with a suspicious ease, either sufficiently impressed by the victims' demise or seeing it as our only way out too. "Especially as now we know the monster's identity."

"Could you enlighten me, please? Just let's go back a bit further. This place gives me the creeps."

With a nod, Arts motioned me to follow her. Together we gingerly began to retreat back into the cave, keeping our weapons at the ready and talking under our breaths. I clenched my Katzbalger as I sensed that the danger had not yet passed.

“A three-headed reptile which lives underground and awakens only a couple of times a year just to gorge itself and go back to sleep,” Arts said. “It’s very much a no-brainer. Has to be a Hydra.”

“Wait a sec. You mean the one defeated by Heracles?”

“Hercules,” she corrected me. “Yes, he did kill one of these. *‘One of’* being the operative word.”

“In any case, it means that they can be killed. Heracles was a Player like us, wasn’t he? Therefore...”

“Will you stop playing Sherlock? You’d better tell me why this Wioulf wakes up so often now? And why didn’t he eat all of the gnomes but take two back with him?”

“Search me.”

“So you see? You shouldn’t jump the gun.”

“One would think you’re the only one who knows what happened here.”

“I might. In which case I really hope that I’m wrong. Because it drastically reduces our survival chances.”

“Would you please stop speaking in riddles?”

“I suggest we just go down to his lair and see for ourselves.”

Can’t say I was in love with the idea, but we simply had no other options. It was either stay here and shrivel away in the glow of the UV toadstools or go reptile-watching to study this mythical character in his natural habitat. There was no question the gnomes would let us out empty-handed.

So we were obliged to pitter-patter our way down, moving on tiptoe for fear of disrupting Wioulf’s siesta.

The mountain turned out to be enormous inside. Not so much enormous even, but rather hollow. No wonder the Hydra made it his home. Or was it a she? There was plenty of space down here to accommodate his or her immediate family too.

This sudden idea made my blood boil. What if the monster wasn’t alone down here? That would explain these frequent “awakenings”.

Still, the truth proved to be much more reassuring — at least at first. Later, it proved to be even more troublesome.

By then, we’d reached the cave’s widest part. Its walls and ceiling had long stopped weighing down on us. It was as if we’d found ourselves in the halls of some underground gnomish kingdom, the likes of which I’d read about in fairy stories in my home country. This was a world far removed from the sorry existence of those short-assed bastards cowering in the donjon upstairs.

There was plenty of light here. And not only from those glowing toadstools — because there were simply not enough of them to illuminate such a large area. Here, the mountain was split all the way down the middle, as if rendered asunder by a sharp sword, letting in the rays of the local sun. This cleft appeared wide enough for me and Arts to climb up though it — but the sheerness of it required incredible rock climbing skills. Either that, or you simply had to know how to fly. Which made this escape option pretty unfeasible.

But at least the sunlight allowed us to study this part of the cave in its entirety.

A brook babbled free in its lowest part, escaping the rocks. Its heated waters steamed, inviting me to strip off and warm myself up in its soothing flow.

Still, for some reason I had little desire to do so — probably because of an enormous carcass that lay by the water's edge.

Actually, at first I thought it was a boulder — until it stirred, barely perceptibly, but enough for me to put two and two together.

The hydra was enormous. Every one of the creature's necks was at least twelve feet long. And those were massive necks, too, more like stone pillars than flesh and blood.

The hydra's actual body resembled two large elephants fused together. The relative shortness of its legs was more than compensated by their unbelievable width, as if this Ancient Greek monster had indeed been mounted on Corinthian columns.

Don't even ask me how Heracles had managed to slay one of them. His hydra must have suffered from a birth defect or was simply a very young one. In any case, it definitely must have been smaller than this one.

Still, Arts didn't appear to be impressed by Wioulf's size. With an agility worthy of a mountain goat, she deftly climbed the rock wall to get closer and motioned to me to follow. I was obliged to comply.

Only when I'd caught up with her did I see what had made her ignore the prospect of her own demise. Not three paces away from the hydra, a clutch of eggs rested in the brook's warm waters, illuminated by the toadstools' UV light.

As reptile clutches go, it wasn't a very big one, thirty eggs at the most. They weren't that impressive, either: maybe slightly bigger than ostrich eggs, if that. Some of them were intact, while others showed signs of hatching as if the chick inside had already tried to get out but failed and was now mustering its strength for another attempt.

Next to the clutch lay the lifeless bodies of the remaining two gnomes. The poor bastards had found their final resting place here — literally “on the shores of the Styx”, as the song goes.

No points for guessing the purpose of their presence here. It was the mommy hydra stocking up on food for her future babies. I had a funny feeling they wouldn’t turn their noses up at this mass of decomposing flesh and would devour it with great relish.

“Not good,” Arts mouthed.

“No. I don’t think the gnomes would appreciate the prospect of having more Wioulfs to feed.”

“I don’t give a damn about them,” Arts snapped. “Besides, if these things get short on food, they’ll simply devour each other. Or they might leave the mountain altogether,” she said, pointing at the cleft running up the mountain. “At this young age, they’re very active and agile. But it doesn’t help us in the grand scheme of things. A broody hydra is twice as dangerous, just like any other animal.”

“Let’s just pray there aren’t more of them here. The eggs can’t have fertilized themselves, you know.”

“I don’t think so. In that case, the gnomes would have been completely screwed by now, having to feed two of the bastards.”

“So how did the eggs got fertilized?”

“I don’t think you’ve ever heard of parthenogenesis, have you?”

“Parthenogenesis? Isn’t it when an angel comes from above and does the dirty deed?”

“Yeah, trust an Archalus with something like that,” she snapped. “You’d better tell me how we can kill this thing.”

That was something I'd been contemplating myself for quite a while already. The sight of the hydra's thick skin suggested that my Katzbalger just wouldn't cut it. What about my Moon Steel dagger? Although definitely not long enough to pierce the skin, it just might work on one of the monster's heads. Unfortunately, I doubted I was up to the task right now — and my current Avatar wasn't very well endowed, either.

I opened my interface, just to double-check. That's right. My Justice only seemed to work on Players. Its description said nothing about monsters the size of a two-story villa.

Plus, there was also another thing. "Arts. I think you should kill her yourself."

"Oh thank you so much," she said sarcastically, patting me on the shoulder. "I knew I could count on you."

"No, you don't understand. You should be the one who kills her."

"What's with all the generosity?"

"I can't afford to raise my karma. Relieving a place like Warwth from this monster would probably be qualified as a valorous deed. I wouldn't mind if it just upped my fame. I'm too used to it by now. But upping my karma is something I absolutely don't need right now."

"Are you serious?" Arts involuntarily raised her voice, then promptly stopped dead in her tracks as the mommy hydra stirred in her slumber. "That's the least of your problems right now."

"Because if everything goes well, I'll either end up without any Avatar — or my subconscious mind might split again, releasing that wretched do-gooder. Which is the last thing I need."

“It doesn’t alter the fact that we don’t know how to kill this baby here. I’m almost sure she’s resistant to magic like all ancient creatures are. The only way to kill her is with physical damage.”

“Cool down. I have this crazy idea. If that doesn’t work, nothing will.”

“You wanna share it with me?” she asked without enthusiasm.

I paused theatrically in order to duly impress her. Judging by the rather unpleasant dig in the ribs Arts gave me, she didn’t appreciate my dramatics. So I just cut to the chase,

“Okay, okay, listen here. First of all, we need to lure the hydra back up to the top.”

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Chapter 8

SOME PEOPLE THINK that the best way to overcome one's fear is by facing it. That is to say, if you suffer from aerophobia, you should practice skydiving; if you're scared of rats you need to keep one as a pet, etc. etc. In other words, you should cure like with like.

Right now I had big doubts about the efficiency of that particular method. As I approached the hydra, my knees grew weaker and weaker. How else would you expect a human being to feel next to this mountain-size Leviathan? I was a worthless crumb that it could crush to dust without even noticing it.

"Don't get any closer!" Arts shouted from above.

Much appreciated advice, thank you. Not that I really wanted to. I wasn't even walking — more like trotting in place, not in a great hurry to advance. And now after her words, I simply froze on the spot.

The three-headed monstrosity was fast asleep. Either its self-preservation instinct had long atrophied as unnecessary, or it simply didn't consider me a threat. The problem was, this defied the very purpose of my approach. I had to attract the mommy hydra's attention, otherwise our plan wouldn't work.

Unable to think of anything better, I picked up a hefty boulder and hurled it at Wioulf.

I might have just as well assaulted windmills with a paper sword or teased Goliath with a toothpick. Zero reaction.

Oh well. Hadn’t Arts just said that a brooding hydra was especially dangerous? Let’s see if we could turn it in our favor.

I picked up another rock, took a good aim and launched it right at the very center of the hatch. Judging by the crunching sound it made, it must have produced the desired effect.

The hydra’s middle head rose. Its eyes opened. Its vertical serpentine pupils scanned the area — and rested on me.

At this point, the other heads woke up too. Slowly the hydra scrambled to its feet.

My heart was beating at the double. Still, the sluggishness of its movements made me feel a bit better. I’d somehow thought that Wioulf would be considerably more agile.

Still, the monster’s next rapid movement made me reconsider. Although admittedly unable to catch up with a running man, it was still capable of flattening you with one of those pillar-like legs. That’s provided one of its heads didn’t get to you before that, eager to add some fresh meat to its diet.

So we ran. Arts was in a better position because she had a good hundred-feet advantage on me. Because of that, she’d already completed the steepest part of our escape route while I was only entering it now.

Still, much to my relief, the hydra seemed to have it much worse. It just wasn’t cut out for distance running. Besides, the creature probably realized I had nowhere to go, apparently intending to corner me and rip me apart at leisure.

The monster was so slow that I was obliged to slow down and wait for it once I'd gotten to the top. Arts had already long disappeared into our little hidey hole, armed with my Moon Steel dagger. She was my wildcard, waiting for my signal to deal the decisive blow.

Having waited for the hydra to rev it up and climb to the top, I resumed my running. Can't say it was easy. My calves were already on fire, my back damp with sweat. At least the Game seemed to have appreciated my effort:

Your Athletics skill has increased to level 20.
You've achieved Mastery in the following skill: Athletics.
Mastery level: 2
-30% to your chances of suffering post-exercise muscle oxidative stress.

No idea what that was supposed to mean but thanks, anyway. Doubtful it would help me kick the hydra's ass though.

Having said that... there was one thing that actually could.

I rummaged through my inventory for my gray mask of Reaper and hurried to slam it on. Phew! Let's do it.

The hydra wasn't running after me, no. It sauntered unhurriedly, as if enjoying a pre-dinner walk to build up its appetite. Considering it had already devoured four gnomes, it actually might need it.

The monster paused momentarily, directly opposite Arts' hiding place. Could it really sense her? I was obliged to launch a few more rocks at the clutch to divert its attention. Only then did it move off and continued toward me, until it was a mere fifty feet away.

At this point, a regular commoner could consider himself dead meat. This was a suicide attempt.

But from Reaper’s point of view... this was where the fun was only about to begin.

I activated the mask’s Dead Souls ability.

By then, we’d already reached the scene of the earlier carnage. What a shame that the monster had taken two of the dead gnomes down to its lair. Still, the remaining body parts scattered around me did the job wonderfully. In a mere two seconds, the poor bastards that had died here earlier were fully reassembled and standing next to me.

With one difference: there was no fear in their eyes anymore.

My ghostly squad attacked the hydra without hesitation. To my surprise, I even noticed a knife in one hand: a small bread knife he must have had on him all along but had never gotten the chance to use it. Admittedly, a kitchen knife was little good against a monster like Wioulf — but it was better than nothing, I suppose.

The hydra was visibly taken aback. Its food had the audacity of attacking it!

The little men did it with a vengeance, showering the monster with pokes and blows as if their very lives depended upon it. Doubtful their attacks did any serious damage — other than the apparent discomfort, of course. The knife owner was the only one the hydra deigned to notice as he ran his weapon across its scales with a scraping noise.

What was much more interesting, my little army turned out to be virtually invincible. Whenever the monster thrust its head out to attack one of the gnomes, the latter simply dissolved into thin air, only to fully regain his shape instants later. Basically, the monster of flesh and blood was forced to fight ethereal spirits — and without much success, too.

The bad news was, at this pace their altercation could last a few years.

Having worked out its most critical enemy, the hydra focused its efforts on the dude with the knife, giving him a hard time — so hard in fact that he didn’t even get the chance to resurrect between the monster’s attacks.

Oh well. It meant it was my turn now.

By now, I’d already managed to identify the creature’s most dangerous moves. It only attacked with its heads, not using its legs at all. Now I had to find out how to give it the biggest grief.

I abstained from using Wall of Fire, mainly because I had no idea how the summoned gnomes might react to it. My logic was, if you couldn’t kill a spirit with a weapon, you could, in theory, do so with magic. And secondly, Wave of Fire was far too costly in a battle provided I wasn’t even sure whether it would work.

And thirdly, I was now the proud owner of Arts’ magic staff. Well, we’d made an honest swap, really: her staff for my Moon Steel dagger. So that’s what I decided to use first.

The first fireball sliced through the cave’s purple glow, digging deep into Wioulf’s body.

The light allowed me to make out another interesting detail. The monster’s heads and body were covered in what looked like charred scales, so dark as if they’d been forged in one of the gnomes’ own smithies. But the scales covering the joints between the hydra’s body and necks appeared much lighter — and probably also softer.

Just as I’d thought, fire hadn’t dealt Wioulf much damage. If I can be completely honest, the monster hadn’t even noticed it. I launched another couple of fireballs at him just to be sure, then put the staff back into my inventory.

Okay. What else could I use to upset him? Frozen water, maybe?

An Ice Flourish covered the monster’s body in pretty motifs, only to be equally ignored. I was beginning to get a bad feeling about this.

I rummaged through my stocks and found something else from my Destruction arsenal: the Arc. Oh well, in the name of Nikola Tesla!..

Oh. This stupid hydra thing was beginning to annoy me. Could it really be immune to all kinds of magic? If so, we were in trouble. Or could it only be resistant to Elemental spells?

In which case I just might have a surprise for it. Something from my forbidden magic arsenal, so to speak.

My hand closed around the handle of the Bloody Whip. I cricked my vertebrae, selecting the most vulnerable spot, and waited for the right moment, then lashed out at one of the creature’s necks.

A low bellow echoed through the cave. The hydra stirred, shifting its feet, as if about to take a running jump. At this point, the gnome with the knife had already resurrected and buried his blade between its scales.

Still, Wioulf ignored him entirely. By then, I’d already managed to capture the creature’s undivided interest — for better or for worse.

The fingers of my left hand closed around the Katzbalger hilt. The Whip became one with my right hand, like a giant mind-controlled tentacle. In the time it had taken the hydra to walk over to me, I’d managed to give it a few nice whacks, aiming for its right head — or rather, its right neck which was now streaked with blood oozing out between the scales.

Still, I had a funny feeling none of those wounds were potentially lethal. The hydra’s hp bar seemed to think the same: it hadn’t shrunk one bit.

But apparently, the decades of leisurely life of sacrificial dinners had taken their toll. The hydra had lost its fabled touch, becoming too soft to fight even marginally threatening opponents. Yes, threatening. At least I flattered myself by thinking so. I deserved a bit of modest praise, didn't I?

I dodged a thrust from its middle head, then ducked to avoid a jab from its right one. Immediately I followed up by lashing out with my whip. Its coils wrapped around the hydra's neck.

Using it as a rope swing, I kicked off hard, launching myself into the opposite part of the cave. I even managed to deal it a slashing blow with my Katzbalger *en passant* — but its blade glanced impotently off the monster's black scales.

No, this wasn't the way to do it.

I landed on the opposite side, dangerously close to the monster, and pulled the whip toward myself. A regular whip wouldn't have budged — but mine was a summoned one, so it obediently uncoiled itself and returned to me, ready to taste more blood.

Regarding the monster's feet which I'd thought so useless, I'd been wrong too. As soon as Wioulf realized that its attacker was real close, it lunged toward me, apparently with an intent to crush me with its sheer weight. Although it didn't quite work out as planned, my ankle did get trapped under its big, meaty, multi-ton body.

[∞]

This time I managed to retreat and even slash out at its neck joint where all three necks came together. And still I didn't yet know what I was supposed to do with this behemoth. The damage from my Whip was sufficient for the hydra to pay attention to me — but way not enough to actually smoke it. My Katzbalger was admittedly a beauty — but pretty

useless against the creature’s chainmail-like scales. There was no winning with it, was there?

Just when I was about to start bewailing my fate, the creature tilted up its central head and squealed in a thin voice. The side heads promptly craned their necks backward as if trying to see the cause for its concern. The hydra’s hp bar quivered and inched back before freezing again.

But apart from that, something very interesting happened. Something arguably even more important.

Just as I’d attacked, all of the hydra’s scales bristled up all at once, like thousands of tiny shields repelling a barrage of arrows. And in doing so, they exposed the monster’s actual flesh: fetid, oily and hopelessly vulnerable.

I just couldn’t miss such an opportunity.

My Katzbalger whooshed through the air, sinking into the juicy fat. Its blade sliced through the creature’s skin with ease and dug deep into its body, dripping with thick dark blood.

Your Short Blades skill has increased to level 26.

Now came the fight’s hot spot. The creature’s middle neck spewed out fountains of blood. Its hp bar may not have yet plummeted but it was rapidly shrinking. The problem was, all this action had finally stirred the hydra fully awake — and the creature must have decided to give it its all.

All three heads went for me. The middle one was marginally slower, but it didn’t make matters any easier.

At this point, I finally realized why, unlike other big snakes, Wioulf couldn’t swallow its victims whole. Its jaws were lined with a multitude of little sharp teeth whose company I couldn’t really avoid.

My shoulder exploded in pain. Then something awful happened to my leg. Before I passed out from the pain, I managed to do the only smart thing that came into my head.

I rewound time.

[∞]

My Katzbalger clattered against the teeth of one of the heads. The second one was shaking its neck in surprise, unable to find me where I should have been. I was obliged to roll over, get back to my feet and get even closer to the bars. Time was on my side: I could see the monster's hp slowly shrinking to zero. Unfortunately, I didn't have enough space to avoid its attacks.

As soon as I thought about it, Wioulf went for me — only to freeze halfway again, screeching in fury. Unexpectedly for its massive bulk, it spun around like a dog chasing its tail.

Admittedly, it did have a tail. But now it also had Arts clinging to it. She was hanging on to Wioulf's aforementioned rear extremity with one hand while clenching my dagger which protruded like an icepick out of the monster's mass.

Dammit! I'd told her to wait for my command!

Actually, this was a good opportunity to survive. Once again I summoned the Bloody Whip and waited for the hydra to start turning. Much to the creature's surprise, the Whip wound itself around its injured neck.

On one hand, Wioulf was desperate to eviscerate the cheeky worm that had dared to attack it from the rear — but on the other, the equally cheeky half-blood Korl just wouldn't leave it alone, just begging to share his friend's fate. And don't forget about the four zombie gnomes which seemed to be completely oblivious to the commotion. They just kept

kicking and punching the hydra without giving much thought to the effectiveness of their actions.

All this made Wioulf zone out for a few precious seconds that we needed so badly. The creature was spoilt for choice. As soon as its wounded head attempted to pull the whip toward itself, giving the middle one the space necessary to attack me, I wasn't there any longer.

I closed in in a single bound and lashed out with the Katzbalger at its green scaly skin. This time, however, I also cast *Combat Blow.* Why not? It cost virtually no mana and was actually very useful.

And it worked after a fashion, leaving another bloody trail in its wake, smaller than the first one but sufficient to ruin the hydra's day.

You've created the Slashing Blow spell!
Your Creation skill has increased to level 5.
Your Destruction skill has increased to level 15.

I could swear this was something really cool — but right now I didn't have the time to check it out. With every drop of blood, the hydra's strength was waning.

Wish I could say the same about its fury. Its remaining good head gave me a clumsy but staggering blow, throwing me back against the railing. As my back hit the bars, I knew I didn't have the time necessary to get to my feet.

[∞]

This blow was marginally weaker. Not that that changed a lot. The only difference being, I somersaulted through the air, landing on my left arm. Both the nauseatingly loud crunching sound and the clatter of the Katzbalger as it dropped from my broken hand were proof enough that our

scuffle was over. All I had left was determination and an unwillingness to croak.

[∞]

Rinse and repeat. Same somersaulting fall, same bones broken. Now I finally realized that I was truly an MMORPG player, just like that unlucky dude who'd saved his character at the least opportune moment just before his death, so that he was doomed to die every time the moment the game was loaded, obliging him to start all over again.

Unfortunately, I didn't have even this luxury.

"Arts!" I wheezed in a voice reminiscent of the rustling of burning autumn leaves.

Not that I held my breath. Arts was too busy right now clinging on to the hydra's tail. Even though the creature had precious little hp left, what could my friend possibly do? Right answer: not much.

And what's more, I couldn't think straight any longer. To the point where I thought I saw Arts shoot up above Wioulf like a human cannonball in the circus.

But no — the girl indeed landed on the hydra's back, then plunged my dagger deep into its spine.

Wioulf attempted a scream. Two of its heads rose high as if calling for help, while the one I'd wounded didn't budge.

The monster's gigantic bulk froze momentarily, then crumpled onto its belly.

The cave shuddered. My broken mechanical hand sparked, echoing the hydra's fall.

The zombie gnomes fell silent, then slowly dissipated into thin air. Now that my enemy had been slain, their summoning time had expired.

All the while, I stared at a disheveled Arts, her eyes still sparkling with excitement, as if she hadn't yet figured out what had just happened.

After a few long seconds, she carefully climbed off the hydra like it was some magic mount. She came over to me and proffered her hand. I took it with my good one, not even being able to speak.

"Could have been worse," she said as she looked me over. "You have a fractured wrist, that's all. We'll find a good mechanic, and he'll fix you up in no time."

"What the hell was that?" I said, finally finding my voice.

"That was that dagger of yours. That's some cool blade. Did you see how it went right through the hydra's armor? I want one too. Either like this one or an orichalcum one, doesn't matter."

"No, that's not what I mean. How the hell did you fly up? Is it a spell? A skill? What was it?"

Arts gave me a cunning look and paused, then said with a smile,

"You surely don't think, do you, that you're the only one with an Avatar?"

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Chapter 9

WE REALLY SHOULDN'T take this life for granted. If we do, we really limit our own horizons as we stop looking around, thinking it's same old, same old around the bend. But sometimes the most mundane thing can be full of surprises — something that you probably stopped paying attention to a long time ago.

A thing — or a human being?

"You could have told me," I tried to reproach her.

"There's nothing to tell. It's not a proper Avatar even. Really, it's a joke."

"Yeah right. I saw you shoot up into the air. Like a fighter plane."

"That's the only decent ability it has."

"Come on now, tell me."

"You're gonna laugh."

"No, I won't. Scout's honor."

As we spoke, we were walking back down into the cave. Not because we liked it there a lot, but simply because the guards weren't in a hurry to unlock the railing. They probably had no intention of finding out how it had all panned out.

Which was why, after an hour spent in hopeful anticipation of their arrival, Arts suggested we did a quick egg run in the meantime. Why not? This was quickly becoming a tradition. Besides, according to Arts, the hydra's numerous issue could be worth quite a bit of money. I was of the same opinion, too.

"It's Pixie."

"Pixie what?"

"Just Pixie. The name of my Avatar."

I exploded in a bout of coughing to cover up my giggling.

Arts gave me a long look. In the mushrooms' purple UV glow her face looked searching as if she was testing me.

I passed her test: at least I didn't laugh. She did.

"It's okay," she said. "Don't pretend. I laughed too when I first got it."

"Pixie," I said, rolling the word in my mouth. "Pixie..."

"I'll tell you something else. The beastman who'd dropped it was a male. What do you call a male pixie? A Pickle?"

"If he was unlucky enough to get himself killed, he was indeed in a pickle," I said.

"Seriously, as Avatars go, this one is pure junk. I've only used its abilities maybe a couple of times. I completely forgot it was even there. But Takeoff seems to have done the trick, don't you think?"

“Of course it has! Hey listen Arts, think you could do something about this too?”

I raised my wounded prosthetic hand, if you could call it so. It hung listlessly, ignoring my commands. The only redeeming feature it now had was the funny way it swayed whenever I walked — but that was a rather questionable benefit.

Arts shook her head. “I can heal a regular limb, provided the wound isn’t too serious. But for this you need a mechanic. We’ll find one for you, don’t worry. If we get out of here.”

“*When* we get out of here,” I corrected her.

Another unpleasant surprise awaited us at the hydra’s clutch. Most of it was already gone, reduced to a heap of broken egg shells. A horde of tiny little creatures scampered away from the gnomes’ dead bodies like rats. They were skinny with unproportionally long necks and crooked little legs, still very thin. Their claws looked very sharp indeed.

We might have caught them if we’d really wanted to — not all of them maybe but quite a few, that’s for sure. Still, as I exchanged looks with Arts, I realized we weren’t going to do it. Why should we, really? To appease the Qirdians who’d forced us down here and left us here to die? What kind of fake humanity (or gnomanity?) was that?

Besides, come to think of it, whatever I did now could affect my karma, which wasn’t a good idea. It might have been a selfish consideration, even if just an afterthought, but this was the main reason why it was Arts who’d been supposed to smoke the hydra and not myself.

Speaking about which...

“Has my Karma risen too badly after Wioulf died?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” Arts admitted. “Quite a lot. You very nearly lost your Avatar. Your Fame has grown, too. Which was to be expected.”

“Don’t worry. Once these little horrors grow up a little, they’re gonna turn this place into a living hell. Provided the gnomes don’t search the cave and kill them all before they get to it.”

“They can’t,” Arts said, pointing at the fissure running up the cave’s wall.

She had a point. At the moment, most of the baby hydras had scrambled out of our way, waiting for us to leave so they could resume their interrupted dinner. But a few of them were already shinnying up the unassailable rock face. Their crooked limbs and curved claws were perfect for the task. Although their tails hadn’t yet grown to their full length, the little critters used them to kick themselves off the ground, leaping along. They were still struggling with their ascent, to the point where two of them had already dropped down to the rocks below. After a while, one of them scrambled back to its feet; the other remained motionless.

“Think they’re gonna survive?” I asked.

“They’ve got no choice, have they? They’re not stupid. Wioulf was smart enough to work out that all he had to do was knock his tail on the rock, and they’d serve him his dinner on a silver platter. I’d say, about one-third of them will survive, not more, which is probably how it always is with them in the wild. So basically, I wouldn’t want to be in town when they grow up. But if you wish, you can always warn their Eparch, no one’s stopping you.”

“What, so he can send us down here again to rescue his stupid little town? I don’t think so.”

“I don’t think so either.”

Arts rummaged through the broken eggs, producing six intact ones. Okay, one of them had a hairline crack but she wasn't too picky.

"They might come in handy," she said as she placed them into her inventory and climbed back to her feet.

Why not? We could indeed use them to pay for services or something. They couldn't perish in the inventory, anyway. This useful contraption was better than a fridge, you could keep fresh milk in it for a month if you really wanted to with no loss to its taste or quality.

"Let's go back," I said, warily watching the circle of baby hydras close tighter every time we tried to take a step back. The idea of being surrounded by so many future monsters made me quite uncomfortable.

Besides, according to Arts, these things could grow really fast provided there was food available. If there was none, they simply hibernated, just like the mommy hydra had done earlier.

Actually, I still wasn't sure whether it had been their mommy or daddy. And considering our obvious physiological likeness to the gnomish race — whom the baby hydras seemed to prefer as their main source of nutrition — I really didn't feel like turning my back on them. I'd rather sit and wait it out next to the dead Mr. or Mrs. Wioulf. It just felt safer that way.

"Arts, are you sure they aren't cannibals?"

The girl gave me a quizzical look.

"I mean, they're obliged to run out of food at some point," I explained. "And seeing as there's plenty of it there, they might—"

"If they're still too small to attack us, they'll either hibernate or they might start devouring the weakest. But you're right: sooner or later, they will come for us."

“Dammit! Open the damn door now!!”

Funny as it sounds, we did hear some footsteps on the stairs. Either the gnome guards had heard me screaming or this was just a regular patrol doing the rounds.

After a minute, the light of a torch blinded me. I squeezed my eyes shut and shrank back.

“Step aside!” a voice commanded in a faint foreign accent.

Arts and I exchanged stares. Still, we obeyed, allowing the new guards to take in the sight of their underground monster which was now admittedly a bit worse for wear.

The scene left a deep impression on them. They started screaming and yelling at each other; one of them ran off upstairs only to return after a while with a dozen reinforcements. The clamor was ear-rending. And still none of them seemed in a hurry to lift the bars, which started to increasingly worry me with every passing minute.

“Anyone gonna let us outta here today?” I finally asked.

My voice had a strange effect on them. They fell silent, almost thunderstruck, as if it wasn’t a human being speaking but a bowl of food they’d slid into Wioulf’s cage. What surprised them even more was that I wasn’t sitting in the hydra’s capacious belly but had the audacity to demand something of them — while the terror of the local mountains lay next to me, dead as a doornail.

Admittedly, I could understand their dismay — but I had no intention to play along with it.

“What was it your Eparch said? *‘If you come out on top, we’ll set you free,’* wasn’t it? Or something like that. I’m absolutely sure he said

something about setting us free.”

“We’ve already sent for him. You need to wait a little.”

“It’s so sad to watch the disrespect with which the Eparch’s very own guards mix his words with dirt,” Arts butted in. “It’s as if his will means nothing to them. Heartbreaking, really. Didn’t he say in front of all of you that as soon as we’d killed the monster he’d waver all accusations against us? You — yes, you, I remember you, you were there with him too! Tell me that the Eparch didn’t utter those words!”

She pointed her finger at someone pretty much at random, I think. Me, I could only make out the guards’ vague outlines in the circle of blinding light. There was no way I could see their faces.

But Arts must have known more about the gnomish psychology than I did. Plus, I was pretty sure that her Persuasion Skill was far more advanced compared to mine. Whatever the case, a meek voice came from the crowd:

“He did...”

“So who do you think you are, after that? Are you a bunch of rogues who don’t give a damn about their leader’s orders? Or are you the valorous Qirdian guards that you are?”

A virulent bout of cussing in the local language was her answer. After a short while, the bars began to slowly creak upward. As soon as the gap underneath was wide enough for us to squeeze through, we promptly did so.

The guards recoiled as if we were contagious. Although not quite afraid of us, they were wary of our company. Can’t say that this was that bad.

“These guys are really weird,” Arts whispered. “They think nothing of throwing an innocent traveler behind bars. But if you catch them out on their word, these hypocrites will do anything to defend their honor.”

While I was deliberating on the best course of action — whether to battle on through or have a chat with that Eparch of theirs — the latter finally arrived at the scene.

Ignoring us, the Eparch darted toward the bars to study the dead monster's body. Having done so, he exchanged a few words with his men before returning to us.

I really didn't like the expression in his eyes. So much so that I didn't even notice how the Katzbalger ended up in my hand.

I turned to check on Arts. She too had already equipped herself with both her sword and her staff. Great minds think alike.

"You don't bite the hand that feeds you," the Eparch said conciliatorily, pointing at our weapons.

"You should have said, *'the hand that tries to feed you to monsters'*," I replied. "We've done what you asked us to. We're free now."

I made a point of speaking as firmly as I could. No question marks. Their sensing our hesitation was the last thing I needed. We had to come across as power incarnate — otherwise we were toast.

"You gave us your word!" Arts said, almost imploringly.

The Eparch cringed like any man when being reminded of a half-assed promise he'd made.

At this particular moment, it became abundantly clear that he had no intention of setting us free. In actual fact, he had his reasons. If he set us free, we would let everybody know about this place where the local Eparch captures any passing Players and just throws them in the clink for no reason. That's not to mention all the poor bastards who'd become the

hydra’s dinner. Then again, the locals probably didn’t give a damn about them.

“She’s right, my Eparch. You gave them your word.”

I turned to the sound. I’d never thought I’d be so happy to see Bordur’s grim face.

“I’m the one in charge here,” the Eparch said softly, as if doubting his own words. “Take them away.”

His order hung in the air like thick cigarette smoke. Still, no one seemed in a hurry to obey. Most of the guards seemed to be looking at Bordur and not the Eparch.

The gnomes’ hierarchy was still a mystery to me. Who was Bordur to them, after all? A mere sergeant, if that. But that wasn’t the point. The point was, his word meant something to all the others.

Which had just become our saving grace.

“Take them away!” the Eparch snapped, seething.

I looked with some doubt at the landing and the bottom part of the stairs. At least twenty gnomes. There were probably more waiting upstairs, listening in. The landing was simply not big enough to accommodate them all. How long would it take them to overcome our resistance?

True, at the moment most of them were shuffling about, undecided. And it was at this very moment that the Eparch decided to show everyone who was the boss here. Of course. Unlike all the others, he had something to offer against us. He was a Player himself, after all.

A lump hammer materialized in his hand. No, scratch that. The biggest and baddest lump hammer I’d ever seen. It was enormous, its steel

glinting a malachite green. It promised nothing good. Somehow I didn’t think he’d decided to knock a few nails in.

Arts tried to step between us.

“Leave it out!” I growled at her through clenched teeth.

Strangely enough, the landing — which had just been packed — was now almost deserted as all the guards had stepped back, shrinking into the walls as they hurried to vacate this makeshift arena.

Admittedly, I had no intention of fighting the Eparch. There was just no telling what would actually happen if I eventually killed him. Would they release us — or would they hang, draw and quarter us on the spot to avenge their leader’s demise? I had little desire to find out.

It didn’t even enter my head that I could actually lose in a one-on-one duel. I’d already donned my gray mask and was waiting for the Eparch to make his biggest mistake.

Which wasn’t long in coming.

He was an expert, no doubt about it. Probably not as good as Hunter himself but definitely better than one Sergei Demidov. Or should I say Serge because Sergei Demidov didn’t exist anymore.

Not that it changed a lot. The Eparch was faster, stronger and more experienced. As hard as I tried to dodge his Hammer, it struck me in the chest, knocking the wind out of me. I was gasping for breath like a fish out of water.

[∞]

This time it worked even better than I could have predicted. I dodged his hammer blow with ease, slid to the left and managed to slip behind his

back. The Eparch swung round pretty quickly — but tactically he'd already lost the fight, because he'd just made his biggest mistake by attacking me.

What I did like about Justice was its 24-hour cooldown.

It only took his hammer a split second to materialize in my own hand. I took a sharp swing, launching it back at the Eparch. Although the distance between us was negligible, I got the impression that the hammer managed to make two full turns in the air before ramming into him.

The Eparch gasped. Droplets of spittle flew from his lips. His eyes bulged. He flew against the wall, knocking over several guards.

Now that he only had 10 % health left, we could start to negotiate.

"I could finish you off with a single blow," I said, "but I think there's been enough deaths for one day. Just let us go, and nobody else needs to die here."

I could tell that it wasn't an easy decision for him to take. Still, after a brief hesitation, he nodded, then started coughing up blood.

Interestingly, the guards didn't seem to be in a hurry to help their leader. I'm afraid there might be new elections here in the very near future.

I motioned to Arts to follow me, then headed for the stairs without putting my sword away. My nerves were taut like dry twine: touch them recklessly and they'd snap.

As we reached the stairs, I paused and checked all the guards out. Bordur stepped forward and literally began to shove them out of our way. We tagged along after him like fishermen's boats in an atomic icebreaker's wake.

I'd been right about more guards waiting for us upstairs. Maybe not every warrior in Warwth, but not far off. Either they already knew about

what had just happened, or they'd just guessed. Despite the grim glares they gave us, none of them attempted to apprehend our bizarre trio.

Bordur took us all the way to the donjon's exit. He nodded and left us, heading back, without as much as a by-your-leave.

"Dammit!" I cussed. "Arts, please stop him. We need to tell him about the hydra's offspring."

"Bad idea," she said, giving me a sullen look.

"We must," I said with an almost imploring expression. "And I can't do it myself..."

"Bordur!" Arts shouted. "Wait a sec!"

We didn't say a word to each other as we entered the Gatehouse. It was perched on a rocky ledge which actually wasn't that far away from the donjon. Arts' mood had deteriorated from bad to "someone's gonna get their head kicked in tonight".

The problem was, as my Professor neighbor used to say, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. To hell or to Firoll — take your pick.

Likewise, our telling Bordur about the hydra's offspring had had very predictable consequences. Namely, Art's karma had soared. Rescuing a whole city from a looming death is no joke. No idea what the gnomes were going to do with this information — whether they'd try to capture all the newborn while they were still young, or whether they'd rather leave the accursed city. The fact remained, she'd lost her Avatar — the one that had so conveniently saved our bacon not so long ago.

"I thought you said it was virtually useless," I said.

"You'd better keep your mouth shut," she glared at me. "Get the dust out."

The Gatehouse turned out to be perfectly normal. Ditto for the Gatekeeper. Just a regular silent dude in a closed helmet and full plate armor, leaning on his sword. He probably didn't give a damn about any gnomes or hydras. As long as they paid their fares.

"Where to now?" I asked.

"Got to fix your hand, haven't we? So I think we need to jump to Ooont via Hist. And to begin with, we'll go to this particular point," she prodded the Gatekeeper's ledger, pointing at some unpronounceable location.

"What kind of language is that?"

"Spiderish. It's the spiders' world. No humans there at all."

"So why is it available to us?"

"Because of a very valuable resource which can only be mined there but which is used in a whole lot of Central Worlds. Just don't get any ideas. We might use it as a jumping-off point, but we absolutely won't wreak havoc there. We'll just stay put in the Gatehouse. Are you ready?"

The jump went as normal, if you disregarded the constantly hiked-up tariffs. Immediately I could smell something heavy and rancid.

I walked over to the door and peered into the pitch blackness of the local night. But was it even nighttime? Not that it mattered. I had no desire to leave the cozy and relatively well-lit confines of the Gatehouse.

"Central World companies only send well-trained groups here," Arts explained. "Thirty or forty Players at least. They hire the strongest and most experienced guys and they pay quite handsomely. And still there aren't many takers."

“I quite understand them. What about that other place? Ooont, isn’t it?”

“You’ll see. It might grow on you.”

To say that she was probably right was an understatement. We left Hist without as much as going on a guided tour.

A fresh sea breeze wafted in our faces. The sea salt crunched between our teeth. Bright sunshine flooded the exit of the Gatehouse.

The contrast with the previous world was quite striking. Understandably, I all but darted for the open doors — only to barely hold on to the edge of a precipice, waving my hands as I tried to keep my balance.

The Gatehouse was located on a high sheer cliff amid a boundless sea. I’d been quite prepared to see anything except this. How were you supposed to get out of here? And more importantly, where to?

Arts pointed into the distance, answering my silent question.

“There’s our transport.”

I peered into the smooth expanse of water. It took me a while to make out either a giant snake or an eel. It was indeed harnessed, just like a regular race horse. A creature was sat on its back, looking marginally like a human being.

It had a wide crest running along its head. Its limbs were unnaturally long and bony. Its skin resembled that of a frog.

No idea about the rest of this world, but its inhabitants and their modes of transportation were indeed quite a hoot.

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Chapter 10

AS WE ALL KNOW, demand begets supply. If, day after day, people keep coming to a garden center asking to buy a sack of rocking horse poo, sooner or later the shop will carry it, as long as they can turn a profit.

This apparently applies to all worlds and not just our own.

Before I could get properly scared at the sight of the water snake and its rider, my jaw dropped in amazement. Two more massive heads poked out of the water to the right of the monster's long serpentine body. Soon the water surface was seething with at least half a dozen more water snakes replete with their riders. And most interestingly, I could tell that they weren't exactly friends with each other. Quite the opposite, even though it didn't descend into all-out hostilities.

The rider who'd been the third to appear out of the water was in fact the first to reach us. He was noticeably faster than all the others. Although his bright-blue mount was considerably smaller than its brethren, it was also the most agile, leaping out of the water only to disappear below again. Every time it jumped, its four long wings, very much like those of a dragonfly, glittered in the sunlight.

Having reached us, the rider tugged at the reins, forcing his pet to rear up. The creature took one last long leap out of the water and froze, hovering in mid-air next to the cliff where we were standing, allowing its master to dismount. I just stood there gawking at the forty-foot leap I'd just witnessed.

I then peered at the Player standing before me. He was an **Auropath**, about the same height as myself but as gaunt and thin as a beanpole. His skin was covered in giant warts; his forward-jutting head created the impression of him being a hunchback. The sight of his webbed fingers couldn't really surprise me anymore.

The Player produced a parchment scroll and unfurled it in front of me. It was a map of a rather large area studded with a great many islands. Each had its name next to it, as well as a series of three-digit numbers.

Arts glanced at the map, then stepped aside.

"So what are we doing now?" I asked.

"We wait," she replied.

Luckily, we didn't have to ponder this riddle for very long. In due time, the other riders joined in the fun, each of them landing on the cliff in the same way as the Auropath had.

They too unfurled their own parchments. The maps were identical — but the numbers all differed.

Only then did I realize that these must have been prices. These dudes were none other than the local taxi drivers. I could only hope that the snakes were equipped with good-quality GPS, saving us the trouble of stopping to ask the way. I really didn't fancy getting lost on this particular planet.

In the end, Arts chose the fattest of the riders. Correction: he wasn't fat, of course, not compared to Arts anyway — but next to the other cabbies he looked definitely chubby. The actual hiring process was simple: Arts met his gaze, nodded and poked the map with a confident finger.

The cabbie dissolved in a satisfied smile, baring several rows of tiny little teeth, then nodded back. All the others, too, headed for their mounts.

As for the Auropath, he even snapped his teeth in a badly concealed disappointment.

“Thank God I didn’t choose him,” Arts said, watching him leave.

“Why did you take that one, then? Was he cheaper?”

“Not really. But it’s important for us to have a smooth ride without any hiccups, and the guy I chose was very constant throughout his whole journey. Also, he was the first out of the water. Which means he has plenty of experience. So, shall we go?”

The rider raised his hand as if understanding her. The snake soared into the air, stopping next to us.

Arts didn’t waste time climbing onto this local water taxi. She sat just below its wings, grabbing at the long webbed spikes between them which lined the entire length from its wings to its tail.

By then, I realized that this thing wasn’t going to hover in the air forever, so I hurried to join Arts. Unable to find my seat number, I just plonked myself down in the nearest spot in front of the girl, grabbing onto a spike with my sole good hand.

The cabbie gave us a fleeting glance, then leaped onto the snake’s head. Immediately we sank below.

In this particular world, they probably loved the Big Dipper just as much as I hated it. Especially when the sharp drop of my rather overheated self was tempered by a rather cool body of water. Not as cool as the North Atlantic in April — and we didn’t resemble the Titanic in the slightest, anyway — but still I didn’t enjoy it at all.

Remembering their initial emerging from the water, I was already bracing myself for the worst when they surprised me again — pleasantly this time.

The cabbie had chosen just the right speed: not too fast and too slow. Something in between riding a water banana and transporting a crystal vase in a coracle. The water barely reached to our thighs. Not once did the snake submerge in its entirety. Overall, I had a feeling I was riding a tiny submarine.

And what's more, I loved it. Judging by Arts' happy face, she shared my sentiments.

The expanse of the sea was amazing. During our entire journey, we only encountered three islands — clearly inhabited, judging by all the farmhouses and the smoke rising from them. Still, they'd flashed past at a considerable distance from us, not giving me the chance to get a closer look.

Our journey turned out to be quite long — but finally, the cabbie headed toward a tiny dot on the horizon which gradually came into perspective.

Our island — because by now I had little doubt that this was where we were heading — wasn't very big. I could probably walk around it in twenty minutes or so. Patches of desperate vegetation clung to the rocky ground, determined to survive. The island boasted a huge cone-topped tower and a spherical building nearby, next to several outhouses.

Having reached the shore, the cabbie dropped us off, then unrolled the scroll again, pointing out something to Arts.

She nodded and turned to me. "Give me a hundred and fifty grams."

"Hefty prices here," I said in disgust but did as I was told.

Having received his fare, the cabbie gave us another toothy smile and even bowed. I was obliged to do the same.

“It’s not cheap here, is it?” I complained to Arts. “We’d have been better off buying our own snake. By the way, what made you come to this Ooont place? Apart from its funny name, that is.”

By way of reply, she patted the departing cabbie on the shoulder, pointed at his snake, then made a gesture opening and closing her forefinger and thumb. It looked like she’d been moonlighting at a shadow theater.

The cabbie smiled again and nodded. He climbed his mount and shoved off from the shore.

“Now watch,” Arts told me.

Having submerged a couple of times, the snake suddenly leapt into the air, as agile as a dolphin, so high that I couldn’t resist a gasp. I knew of course that this was the rider’s expert training at work — but just as it shot up into the air, the creature opened its mouth, emitting a throaty groan:

“Ooont!”

“Holy hell,” I managed. I just loved this cross between a taxi and a wind orchestra.

Very well. Where to now?

Actually, I didn’t need to ask. A stocky man was watching our advance from the foot of the cone tower.

As Players went, he was rather interesting. He was wearing a wife-beater which revealed his mechanical elbow joints, and a pair of ragged cut-off pants showing off his prosthetic legs.

This mechanoid had a rather foreign-sounding development branch: a ***Steiger***. His name was apparently Shoss.

As I approached, I noticed another interesting thing about him: his left eye had been replaced by a small sphere which was apparently crystal.

“Why did you have to come, girl?” the island’s owner said unkindly while looking at me, for some reason. Or not at me even but rather at my lifeless mechanical hand.

“Shoss, don’t forget that you owe me,” Arts said, her words laced with uncertainty.

Oh. That’s a turn out for the books!

“Come next week,” the Player said, waving her words away. “I’m broke at the moment.”

“I need a favor. If you help us out, we’re quits. My friend here needs your help—”

“Is it just your hand that needs fixing?” Shoss interrupted her, addressing me.

“Yes. I had a bad fall.”

“Spare me your lies, Slayer of Horsemen. Your notoriety precedes you.”

A lump formed in my throat. In a way, it was my own fault. I’d created too many problems in too many worlds. And every time I was outed, it ended badly.

The question was, could we really trust this dude?

His rudeness was in fact the thing that actually convinced me. Those who want to manipulate you are normally on their best behavior until a certain moment when you’re lax enough to miss the knife they plunge in your back.

Actually, Shoss had no intention of waiting for us to make up our minds regarding his integrity. He simply limped back toward the tower, motioning us to follow him. We were obliged to obey.

“How much does he owe you?” I asked Arts.

“A smaller chrysalis stone, two cog wheels from the old Fortress of Pain which lies sixty-three islands away from here, and a few Fragments of Khvarn. By my rough estimation, it would be about two kilos dust, if not more.”

“You mean you didn’t even try to claim it when you were trying to raise money earlier on?”

“I did. But I knew it was pointless already then. You see, Shoss is a scientific type. He’s not really bothered about money, even about his own debts. You can’t imagine how many times he was threatened, beaten up and even tortured, with zero results. His humble possessions are not worth the hassle. All he owns is a bunch of old junk. The island isn’t worth having, either. That’s the only reason he’s still alive. His debtors come here occasionally with various assignments for him, trying to make him work off his debt.”

“Aren’t you afraid he might sell us down the river?”

“He’s not that kind of guy,” Arts, protested, defending the local DIY genius. “He’s as unmercenary as the day is long.”

“Stop your blabbing and come in,” Shoss said grimly, turning to look at us. “It’s getting dark already. I’ll be busy all night with this job.”

Indeed, the local sun was already on the decline. I hurried to enter the building, unwilling to make the good gentleman wait. I shouldn’t really make him any angrier than he already was.

As soon as I stepped in, I smelled something that triggered all my childhood memories. My stomach rumbled its protest, reminding me that my last meal had been in the penitentiary of the good old city of Warwth.

“Macaroni cheese,” Arts said, as if reading my thoughts.

“Cheese please Louise,” the mechanoid parried. “You’re here on business. You’re not my personal guests to deplete my food cupboard. Go sit over there,” he added, addressing me.

I headed over to where I was told, using the opportunity to inconspicuously study his dwelling.

This must have been a lighthouse once. At some point, someone must have had the top part removed and replaced it with that bizarre cone-shaped thing, never finishing the job.

The tower’s lower part wasn’t partitioned off. It was an open-plan affair: a bedroom/kitchen-come-workshop. The latter was definitely taking over the space. It was littered with all sorts of rivets, springs, hinges and all kinds of ironmongery, heaped up around a huge mysterious object covered by a large length of tarp.

As I walked past, I accidentally brushed against it.

“Watch out!” Shoss snapped, cussing.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean it.”

“That’s what you all say. All idiots become Players by pure accident — but being idiots, they don’t realize that it’s a smart guys’ game.”

He turned toward Arts who’d perched herself on the lower steps of a nearby staircase. “Go and sit over there, so I can see you. And don’t touch anything, either. And you,” he said to me, pointing at a small workbench, “lay your hand out here.”

I obeyed, then watched him clamping my prosthetic hand in a vice, then fiddling around inside with some miniature tools. He worked quickly and confidently.

What an eerie feeling. He was repairing my hand — and still I didn't feel any pain whatsoever.

Having spent a few minutes in a resounding silence, I decided to bridge the gap. High time to put my college psychology course to good use. Especially because by now, it was abundantly clear to me where his interests lay: in any kind of steely junk.

"What's that you're putting together?" I asked, nodding at the tarp.

"Mind your own business," the mechanoid grumbled.

"If you wish," I eagerly agreed.

Still, after a brief silence, I couldn't help myself. "Don't you think it would have been easier to do this in Mechilos where you could have had everything at your fingertips?"

A faint smile touched the corners of his lips. "You're not the only persona non grata in Mechilos," he replied rather calmly. "Having said that, you've done a nice job on the Manager of the First Order. I couldn't have even dreamed of anything like that."

Now it dawned on me that I'd finally managed to stumble upon a useful conversation starter. Which, surprisingly enough, wasn't anything to do with machinery — but everything to do with our shared lack of love for Mechilos, albeit admittedly reluctant on my part.

"How long has it been since you left there?" I asked.

Shoss frowned. "Long enough."

“Didn’t see eye to eye with the Manager on certain issues?” I suggested.

My left hand twitched slightly, as if someone had accidentally touched on a nerve.

“Mechilos is a good place for high tech idiots,” Shoss finally replied. “They’re too backward for their own good. They created a body part replacement hierarchy on a strictly voluntary basis, dooming countless organic beings to prolonged suffering.”

“I don’t think I quite understand,” I admitted.

“Look at her,” Shoss pointed at Arts with a small hexagonal tool he was holding. “What do you see?”

“I see a pretty girl,” I said without thinking. Only then did I notice the smile of satisfaction on her face.

“Me, all I can see is defects. Lots of design faults. Take her eyes, for instance. In humans, the optic nerve is connected to the light-sensitive cells of the retina from fore and not from aft. As a result, light is obliged to pass through the nerve itself first, which can often cause retinal detachment and potentially permanent blindness. I think I’ve managed to solve this problem,” Shoss pointed at his ‘crystal’ eye. “In my case, the artificial optic nerves are attached to the eye’s wall. There’s so much of the human anatomy I had to improve. Like knee joints,” he tapped his legs which gave off a characteristic metallic clink. “Elbow joints. The spine. I even had to replace my own eardrums. And what was the result? I became more perfect.”

He really upped the work tempo now, to such a degree that I became worried about the safety of my fake hand. Trust me to pick another fanatic! Not an overenthusiastic mad scientist but an outright fanatic: a true blue witch hunter, an inquisitor, a sick law maker dishing out death sentences for

the slightest deviation from the established norm. I had a funny feeling that our new friend belonged to the latter bunch.

“In other words, you suggested that everyone should only fit themselves with the body parts of your own choosing?”

“Suggested?” Shoss cringed as if I’d just relieved myself all over his stainless steel feet. “Most people are brainless sheep with no will or initiative of their own. They need a strong hand. I had a detailed plan on how to upgrade the inhabitants of Mechilos. I wanted to take them to a new level of their development which was nothing short of an evolutionary breakthrough.”

“And the Manager of the First Order wasn’t on board with you, I presume?”

He gave me a weird look: more an expression of pity than incomprehension, as if I’d failed to grasp the essence of what he was saying. “He was, that’s the whole thing. But it could disrupt the whole existing hierarchy on Mechilos. Why have your whole body replaced if all you need to do is tweak a few things? That could result in a major power shift on the local chessboard. Empires don’t suffer change very lightly, if you know what I mean.”

A long silence fell. Shoss kept tinkering with my hand — and judging by the quick probing movements he made with his finger, he was advancing just fine. Arts had wisely shrunk into the woodwork. Me, I stopped all attempts to get him talking — because the things he was saying made my hair stand on end. And I don’t mean my scalp hair, either.

Finally, Shoss reconnected my wrist to my arm, fiddled with it some more, then began putting his tools away. “I don’t have any synthetic skin, sorry. There’ve been no deliveries just lately. This prosthetic may not be new,” (on hearing this, I cussed under my breath, remembering the Iorolf’s words), “but it’s not in bad condition. Should last you another eighty years or so of heavy duty. And if—”

He didn’t finish. Instead, he stopped, motionless, as if deep-frozen on the spot. He reminded me of a meercat studying a potential predator — even though we were the only visitors in his tower right now.

He then darted off and hurried outside. Arts followed.

I wanted to go after them because I was dying of curiosity — but I very nearly dropped to the floor because my hand was still stuck in the vice. I had to undo it myself — but by the time I’d freed it, Arts was already back, followed by Shoss himself.

“Move it!” Shoss snapped.

“Come on, Serge, get your act together!” Arts concurred.

I followed them outside, uncomprehending. Still, we didn’t head for the shore. Instead, we ran toward the outhouses.

A door creaked as Shoss swung it open, shoving us inside so hard he very nearly buried us under a heap of steel junk.

It seemed somewhat colder here. The air reeked of oil and old leather. Still, I was too preoccupied with what was unfolding outside, seeing as the withered wood of the walls offered a clear view of the area.

The gist of it was, we weren’t Shoss’ sole guests any longer. A motorboat was ploughing through the boundless sea, heading for the island, its blinding headlight slicing through the gloom of the night.

Its passengers were a noisy bunch. They joked, laughed and were generally pretty bossy. Even before I could read the name tags hovering over their heads, their color told me everything I needed — or not needed, as the case may be — to know. These were Players.

And once the boat had finally come on shore, I saw it wasn’t a boat at all.

The Players had arrived on a huge lump of ice. There was no headlight, either: they’d used a spell instead, similar to my Light, only infinitely stronger and more efficient.

At least now I could take a good look at the visitors’ strange clothes and read the names of their development branches.

“Who are they?” I whispered to Arts.

“That’s someone you really don’t want to see. They’re Central World mercs.”

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Chapter 11

NORMALLY, EVERYTHING IN LIFE has a simple and logical explanation. Everything — even the fact that I'd managed to lay my hands on some pretty unique abilities.

So now, having got a good eyeful of the new arrivals, I understood the reason behind their admittedly bizarre choice of vessel. Which in turn allowed me to fully appreciate their powers.

Admittedly, what I'd just seen did nothing to reassure me.

My Insight worked like clockwork, allowing me to identify the mercenaries as they walked toward Shoss. The tall guy — even taller than myself — was a ***Freezer***. The short Zverg that sauntered alongside him was a ***Manipulator***. A plump Purg with a mop of hair hanging to his shoulders was a ***Stealther***. An enormous orc trundling along next to him was a ***Cyclone***. And finally, the dude walking at the back was a ***Cloneer***.

My first thought was that we were toast. My second thought completely confirmed the first one. Ditto for the third.

Judging by their bizarre "speed boat", their Freezer was one powerful dude. He could probably freeze anything that stood in his way, ourselves included. The Stealther was more or less clear too: his development branch must have allowed him to vanish into thin air. The Cyclone must have had something to do with wind power: if my hunch was right, it was probably he who propelled the boat along.

As for the Cloneer and Manipulator, I too had my ideas about them, none of them overly optimistic.

All five appeared to be half-stewed. Cloneer was poking fun at Cyclone who growled back half-heartedly, baring his filed-down fangs. I could see he didn't take the former seriously, waving his jibes away like a cow swats a fly with its tail.

"Hi Shoss," Manipulator said, producing a strange item from his inventory. It looked a bit like a steel box resting on a number of little thin legs. "We need to get this damn thing fixed."

"You water devils! Where did you manage to get a baby transmutator?"

"Where we got it, it's not there anymore," Cyclone snapped. Either he was totally fed up with Cloneer's sarcasms, or he simply didn't consider Shoss to be worthy of any form of courtesy.

"Cool it, will ya?" Manipulator said. "Shoss is our friend, isn't he?"

For some reason, his words brought a smile to everybody's lips. Shoss, however, shrank his head into his shoulders.

Uh oh. No points for guessing what kind of relationship they had. I could bet that Shoss owed these dudes a whack of money and was obliged to work it off by doing all sorts of mechanical jobs for them.

Still, now I was more interested in Manipulator. Admittedly, he'd failed to catch my attention at first. And you should never judge a book by its cover.

The funny thing was, I couldn't even take a good look at him as he was constantly surrounded by his friends. Add to this the fact that the sun had already set, the only source of light being the weak glow of the tower's windows.

“Come inside,” Shoss flustered. “It’s warm over there. Let’s have a look at that transmutator of yours.”

Warm? He was dead right there! The unheated shack where we were hiding was getting colder by the minute. Nothing like our Russian winter, of course, but still the local summer nights seemed cold enough to get pneumonia — maybe not for me, given my Korl nature, but Arts certainly could.

“Cyclone, Cloneer, you two stay outside,” Manipulator ordered. “Seeing as both of you enjoy each other’s company so much.”

The door opened, momentarily casting a bright light on his face.

Finally I was able to get a good look at him. He was middle-aged — I’d say, in his fifties by Terran standards. His left cheek was pockmarked with small scars, a deep healed burn in place of his left eyebrow. There was no way you could call him a beauty — more of a beast, rather. There was something threatening about him, something predatory.

“Is that really necessary, boss?” Cloneer voiced his lukewarm indignation. “We were just fooling around.”

“There’s no need for that, really,” Shoss interfered. “There’s nobody here but us. And it’s cold hanging around here.”

Manipulator didn’t even dignify him with an answer. He waited for Freezer and Shoss to enter the tower, then followed them. The door closed, submerging the island into the gloom once more.

The good news was, Shoss hadn’t turned us in. The bad news was, in order to get back to the shore and catch another snake taxi, we’d have to slide past those two. Talking about whom...

“If we manage to get back to the sea, how would the cabbies see us?” I whispered to Arts.

“They won’t,” she replied. “They don’t travel at night. *‘The sun goes down, the doors go shut’* — ever heard this expression before?”

“Wait a sec. So what do you want us to do?”

“We wait till these guys finish up here. The last thing we want is for them to see us.”

“Why, what’s gonna happen then?”

“Nothing good, that’s for sure.”

Still, despite our best efforts, we got in trouble anyway.

By now, Cyclone and Cloneer had stopped bickering. Firstly, because they were indeed frozen out of their minds. Secondly, because you don’t need to be a mind reader to know who’d come out best in their conflagration. An orc is no match for a human in a bout of banter. Cloneer must have realized it because he soon got bored of picking on his partner.

And thirdly, because this particular green-skinned fellow started behaving rather strangely.

Cyclone opened his jaws wide, baring his filed-down fangs, and noisily drew in the air through his wide nostrils.

And again. And yet again. His breathing was getting heavier, his eyes filling with anxiety, as if he’d sensed something suspicious.

Something — or someone?

A shiver ran down my spine.

“Arts,” I mouthed.

“Oh no,” she groaned. “That’s that wretched racial ability of his!”

“Which one?”

“Orcs have an excellent sense of smell. Same goes for their hearing. It’s not for nothing they’re called ‘green-skinned dogs’.”

“Very funny,” I said, sensing my own heart drop to my guts as the muscle-bound Cyclone headed towards the shack where we were hiding.

“Hey Cyclone, where d’you think you’re going?” Cloneer shouted after him. “Boss is gonna skin us alive! Come on, get back now!”

“There’s someone in there,” Cyclone said, sniffing the night air.

“Didn’t Shoss say there was nobody on the island?”

“There’re two of them in there,” the orc carried on. “A man and a woman. The man is scared. I can smell his fear.”

“Liar,” I peeped, addressing Arts.

The orc jerked to a halt. “Did you hear that?”

“No I didn’t,” his partner admitted as he started after him. “But if there is someone inside, I’ll personally slit Shoss’ throat.”

Then I finally found out the meaning of ‘Cloneer’ — and I can’t say I liked it.

He suddenly filled with light, then reappeared not two paces away from his old self.

There were two of them now. But he didn’t seem to be satisfied with the result because he continued to clone himself.

In less than ten seconds, the whole area was filled with his copies. In the end, I counted five — and by then, I’d already forgotten which one the original was.

Was there any difference at all? Were his clones just empty vessels or fully-blown creatures?

My thoughts scattered like birds frightened by a gun shot. The worst thing about it was, I had no idea what to do.

My hands reached for my Avatar on their own accord, while I fully realized that I only had one ability still active out of the three — and not the best one, at that.

“I’ll open the door now,” one of the clones said with a smirk, “and I’d like you to clear the air inside. Or should we call the boss so he can shoot them with his blunderbuss? You know very well I can’t use sophisticated weapons once I’m split.”

“No need to call anyone,” the orc replied. “We’re quite capable of clearing the rats out.”

On this point I would debate — but it looked like I’d run out of arguments.

I drew my Katzbalger and stood by the door. Arts drew her own weapons too, even though I could read a certain reticence in her eyes.

Never mind. We’ll battle through.

Maybe.

One of the clones yanked on the door.

A powerful gust of wind knocked us off our feet. Actually, this was something I'd expected from someone with a name like "Cyclone".

Never mind. He's got his wind, and we've got ours.

I grabbed Arts by the hand and cast Whirlwind.

I'd thought that with all the scattered junk it would raise into the air, it might delay them somewhat, giving us a bit of time to get to the shore. I still hadn't worked out what we might do once we'd gotten there — but I reckoned that being on the water was an awful lot better than being cornered.

Still, those two made our task easier. The moment the front door opened, releasing the Whirlwind, Cyclone clapped his hands, setting off a barely visible airwave all around him.

I watched in disbelief as it extinguished my own spell. Still, the Whirlwind had cost me 350 pt. mana, meaning that it had been cast for real, and no mistake.

[∞]

Actually, this time I hadn't had the time to think of anything. I just barged forward the moment the door started to open.

Surprisingly, my little improv worked out surprisingly well. Although the orc managed to cast his own spell, I succeeded in launching myself at his feet, slashing out at his battered boot.

I'd have thought that a whack with my Katzbalger couldn't do him much damage. Still, Cyclone's furious bellowing proved me wrong.

I rolled to my feet, only to receive a slashing downward blow from one of the speedier clones. Nothing too lethal but still quite unpleasant. All the others were already creeping up on me too.

[∞]

Another leap. Another blow to the orc's foot. Another roll. This time I dodged the clone's weapon which whooshed through the air right next to me.

I jumped to my feet, watching the circle of identical men close in on me.

Arts' arrival on the scene added a note of confusion as she loosed off a chain of fireballs. Unfortunately, they only hit one of the clones, only dealing him slight damage. Another gust of wind quelled the flames, pinning the girl to the ground. Despite all of Cyclone's screaming, I just couldn't put him out of the game.

Which was why, judging by all approximate estimations and serious analytics, I was about to face an untimely and uncheerful end. Of course, I'd promptly donned my Avatar and even reached for the Harvest of Blood — but I still had no idea how it could possibly help me. Although it could indeed strip my enemies of half their hitpoints, I still had to finish them off somehow — and six against two (one, even, because by now, Arts was seriously out of circulation) was a very sad ratio indeed.

"I'm gonna kill that sonovabitch myself!" Cyclone growled.

"No, wait!" one of the clones shouted. Or it could have been the real Cloneer, I just couldn't tell.

"He's right, man," I butted in, addressing the orc. "You should listen when someone smarter than yourself is speaking."

It looked like they might not kill me straight away, after all. Or at least some of them wouldn’t.

Cyclone switched a surprised stare to his partner. Overall, he gave me the impression of someone who normally acted in haste and regretted at his leisure. Provided he knew what regret was.

Which was probably why Cloneer hurried to explain,

“You can’t even imagine who’s standing in front of us.”

“Oh yes I can,” Cyclone said, not letting me out of his sight. “This is the little worm that had the audacity to wound me.”

“This is the Time Master. The Player from Cesspit, that hole in the wall, who killed the Horsemen.”

“Oh,” the orc said, casting me a puzzled look. Apparently, Cloneer’s words had piqued his interest.

I would have been stupid to think I was the only one in possession of Insight. Still, this brief reprieve before my death was quickly turning into another trap.

What would these brave dudes decide to do with me now? Would they send me to some secret lab to experiment on me?

“Listen guys, we could come to an agreement,” I proposed.

“Oh yes we could,” one of the Cloneers agreed. “Cyclone, go get the boss. Tell him everything just as it happened.”

“Why is it always me?” the orc protested. “Go fetch him yourself.”

“Why, you want him to run off again? Didn’t you see what he did to your boot?”

“That was a coincidence!” Cyclone announced, seething.

“Oh no. He can rewind time. This *worm*, as you called him, can defeat anyone one-on-one. Even you. But me, he can’t.”

“Why not?” the orc insisted stubbornly.

“Because if he could, he’d have already done so. You don’t have many charges left, do you?” Cloneer asked me, smiling, then turned back to his partner. “Do me a freaking favor and go get the boss, will ya?”

Grumbling, the orc headed for the tower. One of the clones promptly took his place pinning Arts to the ground.

He really shouldn’t have. Because I really couldn’t tell them apart — which meant I’d have to kill them all.

At some point. Maybe.

Surprisingly, my anger had already abated. My Dark alter ego would be having a fit right now — but I simply made a mental note, putting Cloneer on my “good guys” list. Then I just carried on waiting to see how the night would turn out.

Manipulator shot out of the tower like a Jack-in-the-box, followed by... no, scratch that. Shoss didn’t exactly follow him — he was thrown out of his own house by Cyclone’s firm hand. Freezer sauntered in their wake, followed by Stealther.

On seeing me, Manipulator produced a strange-looking thingy out of his inventory. It looked like a rifle big enough to hunt elephants with. Its futuristic aspect made it clear that if it went off, you’d know all about it.

He sized me up and tut-tutted. “Why didn’t you tell me, Shoss, that you had visitors here?”

“This is the first time I see them,” Shoss began, then cut himself short under Manipulator’s glare.

“The only reason you’re still alive is because we need you,” Manipulator growled. “Now we’ll have to decide what we’re gonna do with him.”

“We could send for Archie, the Analyst. He could tell us exactly what types of Avatars he has...” one the clones rattled off.

He didn’t finish — because he disappeared. Another one followed, as well as a third and a fourth. It was the one who was standing the closest to me — Cloneer himself — who finished the phrase off:

“... so we can sell him to the highest bidder.”

Dammit! I should have marked the time. How long did his ability last?

“So who do you want to send for him? These two?” Manipulator snapped, pointing at Cyclone and Freezer. “Our strongest fighters? You might just as well invite him to escape.”

“You could calm him down a bit, couldn’t you?”

“Not for very long.”

“So should we take him to Archie ourselves?” Cloneer offered, pointing at me.

“Exactly. But not now. In the morning. I wanted to spend the night here, anyway. These waters aren’t safe in the dark. In the morning, we’ll get to the Gates, and I’ll escort him to Archie myself.”

I chuckled — apparently too loud for comfort because Manipulator must have heard me.

“You think I can’t make you do that?” he said, addressing me. “You really think a Player can only travel through worlds on their own free will?”

His words had a strange effect on his team. Freezer gave me a crooked smile. Cyclone’s face relaxed into a nasty grin. Cloneer giggled. Stealther alone stood with a stony face.

“Okay,” Manipulator said, replacing his strange weapon into his inventory. “Let’s do it this way. We’re gonna fight. One on one. Unarmed. If you defeat me, I’ll let you go. Good enough?”

“Provided you swear an Oath,” I said.

“I swear on the Game!”

I still couldn’t shake off the feeling that they were leading me up the garden path, even though his Oath appeared to have been accepted, judging by a flash that momentarily lit up the night sky. No idea what the catch was — but what did I have to lose, other than my own pride? Besides, Hunter had taught me to fight, after a fashion. And I still had two charges up my sleeve, if push came to shove.

Okay. Let’s dance.

Admittedly, I felt a bit awkward. I was taller and stronger than him. My arms were half as long again. Nothing prevented me from finishing this confrontation in the first round, so to speak. It felt almost like fighting a child.

Still, I forced myself to shove my highfalutin’ ideas where the sun don’t shine. It wasn’t the right moment to even think about this. I had to knock him out first and then see how it would all turn out. Ha’d sworn the Oath, after all.

I didn’t charge at him straight off. Instead, I started pussyfooting around him, thinking how best to attack him.

Manipulator, however, was behaving admittedly very strangely. He didn’t even raise his hands. In fact, he spent more time looking around than at me. I spent a bit of time studying his fighting style which could be best described as “hands in pockets”, before deciding to get the ball rolling. After all, why not?

My first blow became my last. I did land it on him. And it was a good one, even if I say so myself. I managed to knock him to the ground — which also seemed to have done something strange to myself too.

It was as if all of my muscles were spasming at once. I dropped like a felled tree watching him climb to his feet holding his jaw.

“Good one,” he said. “Why didn’t you rewind time? You want me to tell you why? Because as soon as you’d touched me, you lost all willpower. You could neither think nor act. Now you’re awaiting my orders. Get up.”

I obediently scrambled to my feet.

“Now sit down.”

I slumped down onto the cold ground.

“This is how I’m gonna take you through the Gates,” Manipulator said with a smile. He leaned over me, baring his crooked little teeth right in my face. “I’m gonna find out what it is that the Horsemen left you — and *then* I’m gonna sell you. For real big money.”

“Boss, what about the girl?” Cloneer asked. “If we don’t need her, we could have some fun with her. She seems to be a lively one. And I like that.”

“Are you gonna do that alone or you gonna clone yourself?” Freezer asked sarcastically.

“Why not? I’m never against a gang bang,” Cloneer chuckled.

“Haven’t you got enough floosies in the camp?” Manipulator snapped.

“She’s not a floosy. That’s the whole point.”

“First we’re gonna take her to the Analyst too. She might be hiding something useful too. If you lay one finger on her, you’ll have me to reckon with.”

Manipulator’s face distorted with fury. And just as it did, I realized I could move.

The problem was, it wasn’t my own wish. It was Manipulator who’d kindly allowed me to move because he was already heading back toward the tower.

“Take those two to the shack,” he dropped to his sidekicks as he walked. “And cast some good spells on the walls so they don’t run off. Tomorrow, they’ll make us all stinking rich.”

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Chapter 12

YOU CAN'T WIN ALL THE TIME. In fact, it's definitely bad for you. A defeat gives you a totally different outlook, allowing you to see most inconspicuous things in a different light. And the more painful the defeat, the more you might find out about yourself. You learn from the experience and ultimately, become stronger.

For instance, my earlier experience had opened my eyes to the fact that I wasn't almighty. You'd think it was self-explanatory, but it had cost me a lot of blood, sweat and tears — literally — to finally face the fact. And if before I could ride the coattails of my team, now that I'd become the team leader, I suddenly realized that there were lots of people in this world infinitely more powerful than myself. Not Gods, not some ancient titans, but just regular mercenaries — who too were a power to be reckoned with.

But that wasn't the problem. The problem was, how the hell were we supposed to get away from them? I really wasn't in the mood to die — definitely not now when we already were within a stone's throw from the Central Worlds.

My head was about to explode with all the crazy thoughts. Arts was flat out — either from fatigue or from the stress of it all. She slumped down with her back against the wall. I covered her over with my trench coat. I had no need for its magic right now, anyway — and I really didn't want my friend to freeze to death.

I walked over to the shack's wall and touched one of the withered planks. Normally, breaking it would have been a joke even for a regular guy

like I used to be once. But not now.

I pounded the planks with my fist and immediately grabbed at my hand, rubbing my knuckles. It felt like I'd just slammed it against a brick wall. That was some powerful spell they must have cast on it. They hadn't even barred the door from the outside. There was no point. The entire shack was enveloped in a thick layer of impenetrable mist.

Still, they'd posted a couple of guys to guard it. It's nice when your enemies think so highly of you.

I crouched next to Arts, wondering how to survive this encounter. 'Survive' being the operative word. As far as I'd gathered, they fully intended to gut me alive, retrieving whatever I had of any value. I even tried to come up with some defense scenarios and rummaged through the entire shack in the process.

Still, I found nothing of any use other than a bunch of steel junk. Surely I hadn't expected Shoss to plant a set of escape tools somewhere here just for my convenience. This was the sort of thing that only happens in C-movies.

So I just decided to wait it out. I just sat there, watching the greenish glow of their defense spell seep through the cracks in the planks.

I didn't even notice that I was falling asleep.

This felt like an instant change of a movie set. I wasn't cowering in Shoss' shack any longer — instead, I found myself in the middle of a city. Or some sort of town, maybe.

Judging by its architecture, it definitely wasn't human — but it wasn't a high tech kind of place, either. I didn't get the chance to take a good look at it. Several figures in flowing robes appeared out of nowhere right in front of me. Surprise, surprise.

“Hi guys,” I said. “I thought you’d forgotten all about me.”

“You landed yourself in quite a predicament. We don’t think you’ll be able to extricate yourself without our help.”

“I’m open to any suggestions. How about you send me an assault landing group? Or give me some wunderwaffe gun?”

“Oh no. All we’ll do is point you in the right direction. Everything you need is concealed within you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t give me that BS.”

“Just remember: time is on your side now.”

“Actually, it’s vice versa. I only had eight days to find you. And now it’s even less. And now I’m stuck here like a turd on a blanket. I haven’t even got to Anchor World yet in order to charge up that artifact of theirs. The one that allows Gatekeepers to travel between worlds.”

“Time is on your side now,” the Chorul repeated slowly.

“Like — hell — it — is,” I enunciated. “You aren’t listening, are you?”

“And one more thing. Sometimes it’s better to avoid the sane ones and stick to the loonies.”

“Are you freaking mad?”

As I finished the phrase, I found myself back in the shack.

Funny, that. I’d never been snatched out of reality so sharply before. Had I even been asleep? Considering that all my earlier Chorus dreams had always come true, there might have been some sense in what they’d said. Although admittedly, it had sounded like they’d been poking fun at me.

And this thing about loonies, I just couldn’t work it out at all. Could it be one of those haughty insights that might take me decades to understand?

The key word in our encounter was “time”. It can’t have been for nothing that the Chorul had repeated it twice. Come to think of it, he had always been the only one to speak.

Irrelevant, anyway. I needed to solve this time riddle of theirs.

I spent until dawn racking my brains and rummaging through my inventory. Still, I couldn’t come up with anything helpful on the fly. Only when I heard voices coming from the tower did my gaze finally alight on the item that had already saved my bacon quite a few times.

Of course. Time was indeed on my side. “Arts, wake up.”

“I wasn’t asleep,” she said, wiping the drool from the corner of her mouth and staring back at me uncomprehendingly. “What happened?”

“Nothing you should worry about. Just remember: we only need to last a few hours.”

“And then what?”

“Well, then—”

“Hey you love birds, are you keeping yourselves warm?” Manipulator’s rude voice came from the outside.

The green glow disappeared.

“I wouldn’t let such a pretty girl freeze to death, would I?” another voice said. “Especially when she has so little time left to live. You need to have some fun before kicking the bucket.”

I recognized him, too. It was Cloneer. Dude, dude. You're begging for a slow and painful death. Even more now that I'd seen the light at the end of the tunnel.

Still, I had no intention of showing off right now. Funny as it sounded, the time wasn't right yet.

The mercs, however, treated me as if I was a serial killer on death row. They'd all but put a bag over my head to ensure that I didn't bite anybody. Very smart, nothing to say.

By now, Freezer was already finishing casting his magic by the water's edge, making broad gestures over their ice boat. Cyclone was hovering nearby, glancing unkindly in my direction. All the others had already gathered around us.

Shoss stood by his tower, watching. He appeared to have faded and aged overnight. I could tell he wanted nothing more than for all of us to get the hell off his island and leave him in peace.

"Move it," Manipulator said. "If you do anything stupid, we'll kill the girl on the spot. And you'll be next. You get it?"

I nodded. "Totally. Come on, Arts."

We staggered toward the shore, surrounded by quite an impressive escort.

We didn't speak. We'd already discussed everything we needed the night before. I had little desire to annoy our enemies by blabbing on.

To put it short, I had two theories. The first one being that the mercs worked for some well-known Order or corporation. In which case we might live a little longer as they studied our Avatars and appraised them, thinking how best to either use or sell them. This scenario suited me just fine because it might take them quite a bit of time to pull it off.

The second theory suggested that this group didn’t have a permanent employer, earning their living by doing bit jobs. That would be much worse, because there was no knowing what they might want to do with us. They could sell us to the highest bidder — or they could just kill us and lay their hands on my Avatars, whatever.

In the meantime, we’d reached the frozen vessel. It rather resembled a half-cocked speed boat. There was no rudder — apparently because it wasn’t needed. Backless slabs of ice served as seats.

Oh great. I had no desire to freeze my butt off. If anyone had told me that I would be swanning around on the sea of some mysterious planet in an ice boat, I would have been ecstatic. Now, however, the sight of the icy craft only plunged me further into doom and gloom.

“Are you serious? We’ll get frostbite,” I said, looking at Manipulator.

“That’ll be the least of your worries. You won’t have the time. Take a pew. Over there in front.”

I was obliged to comply, seeing as my warm pants and the trench coat I’d gotten back from Arts alleviated the situation a little. She too produced her winter clothes from out of her inventory.

Admittedly, we felt a bit shivery. Myself included, of all people. The sun had only just awoken over the horizon, not yet having climbed into the sky, while we were sitting there on a lump of ice freezing as we awaited our destiny.

“It wasn’t so cold last night,” Cloneer butted in.

“That’s because you were drunk,” a voice replied.

“I wish I could be that today,” he replied. “But we’re all dry.”

“Quit gobbing off,” Manipulator snapped, climbing on board. “Go take your places. Cyclone, you go last.”

Indeed, Cyclone waited until everyone had taken their places before stepping toward us. The boat rocked under his weight. No wonder: he was well over three hundred pounds if not more.

He stood in the back, showing no desire to sit down. He must have been on Freezer’s team for quite a while because the job of propelling our floating iceberg seemed to be resting on his powerful green shoulders.

We pushed gently off from the shore, gradually gaining speed.

Eventually, I couldn’t help myself any longer. I turned round to see how Cyclone was doing it.

What I saw quite struck me. I got the impression that the orc was one with the element he was controlling. His hand seemed to emit air currents which disturbed the water surface, making the ice boat go even quicker. The orc himself looked on quite nonchalantly, seemingly bored as he stared at the oncoming waves, dampening their swell. I even started to get worried that we were speeding up too much. Still, Cyclone seemed to be part of the boat, expertly accelerating until it reached its cruising speed, after which he just stood there staring into the distance.

None of the other mercs took their eyes off me — so much so that it made me feel uncomfortable.

By the time we’d reached the cliff with the Gatehouse, the sun had already risen over the shore. Freezer had to refreeze the boat several times during the trip — but it still continued to thaw out with each passing minute.

Funny, wasn’t it? If we didn’t make it, it would be the weirdest of deaths.

Still, we got there in one piece, then climbed up along some steps roughly hewn into the rock which I hadn't previously noticed. Once we'd reached the top, we were ordered to stop.

"We'll take you there first," Manipulator said, poking me in the stomach (he probably wanted to poke me in the chest but was too short for that). "Freezer, Cyclone and Stealther will escort you. Cloneer with stay with the girl. And once we've reached Hist, I'll leave you with them and come back for her."

Judging by Cloneer's smug grin, I really didn't want to leave Arts alone with him. What if he decided to disobey his orders? What would happen then?

I don't think so!

"How about you sending Cloneer with my party?" I asked. "If I remember rightly, he was the only person who could defeat me earlier."

Manipulator gave me a wry look. "What are you up to?"

"He's not up to anything, boss," Stealther spoke for the first time. "He's just worried that Cloneer might try it on with the girl while we're not there. And he might have a point. Just look at his tongue hanging out!"

"Keep your mouth shut, short ass!" Cloneer exploded. "If the boss says you don't do it, you don't do it!"

Oh well. Their little group was anything other than close-knit.

Manipulator gave Cloneer a long dubious look. "Very well," he said with a shake of his head. "Cloneer is coming with us. Stealther will stay with the girl."

"But, boss..."

“Shut up!” Manipulator’s ugly face distorted with fury as he raised a commanding hand. His palm was small and plump but for some reason, I didn’t find it funny.

All the others fell silent too.

“What’s in Hist?” Arts spoke, making use of the break. “There’s nothing there except spiders.”

“You’d be surprised. There’re quite a few things there. Enough,” he turned to face me. “Are you ready?”

His question sounded rather mocking because he’d already touched my hand.

His ability worked really fast. I didn’t even get the chance to think of anything. My train of thought evaporated as my body succumbed to his will, oblivious to any analysis or self-pity.

We entered the Gatehouse, walked over to the altar and joined hands. Manipulator didn’t even check the book. He knew very well where he was going.

I didn’t even manage to make out the name of the place. It was a strange word full of lisping vowels and virtually no consonants. I would have never been able to repeat it after him.

He threw the dust into the bowl. It rose, suspended in mid-air, as we teleported to the pitch-black spidery world of Hist.

I was flying blind, so to say, seeing nothing around me, until Freezer conjured up a light globe. Almost as soon as we’d left the Gatehouse, Manipulator’s control of me faded. Can’t say I was too happy. A brief glance at this dark world allowed me to come to a rather upsetting conclusion: Hist wasn’t the friendliest of planets. No plants or trees, just

occasional outcrops of sharp rocks overgrown with threadbare sheets of old, tattered cobwebs. What the hell were we doing in a place like this?

“Wait here,” Manipulator said once we’d put a respectable distance between ourselves and the Gatehouse. Then he turned to me, “Don’t even think about escaping. It’ll be even worse for you. If you come across a spiders’ path, you’re as good as dead.”

In this, I could well believe him. In any case, I had no desire to escape into the darkness, not knowing where I was going, and without Arts, too. Oh no. I just might finish watching this show to the end.

My escorts seemed to be quite relaxed. Apparently, this world didn’t evoke any negative connotation among them. Maybe they were used to it already? Lucky bastards.

One thing that struck me as odd was the close looks that Cloneer kept giving me. But I just pretended that I hadn’t noticed anything and that I was here for the beer.

Ten minutes later, the rest of the group had joined us. I didn’t feel very good watching Arts walk unnaturally like a robot over this strange terrain. Still, Manipulator soon set her free.

Then he produced his bizarre-looking weapon. “Don’t do anything stupid. Just follow Cyclone.”

Yes, yes, we got it. Not a step out of line, or he’d shoot. He really shouldn’t be pointing that thing at us at all. His finger just might slip.

“If you err from the path, you’d wish I’d have shot you,” he said with a nasty grin. “Let’s shove off, Cyclone.”

So we shoved off. The orc seemed to be able to find his way around in the dark really well, occasionally stopping to take in a noseful of air. A

couple of times he raised a warning hand, forcing our group to freeze for a certain period of time. Then we'd just carry on moving.

Freezer followed the orc, illuminating our path with his light globe. The spell lasted about ten minutes, forcing him to stop and recast it from time to time.

All the other mercs came in our wake. Cloneer even cloned himself once in a while, apparently readying himself for any crazy escape attempt from myself.

Still, I had no intention of doing so. The time wasn't right yet.

I fully understood though that the further we went, the fewer chances I'd have of ever turning back. According to Manipulator, the spiders' paths were constantly changing. Only them — meaning the mercenaries — knew where they could step.

He divulged all this, looking very full of himself, but I had a funny feeling he wasn't telling me the whole truth. Most likely, they all had some sort of ability. The orc definitely did.

Talking about whom, he'd just stopped again. Still, this time, instead of turning to us, he just stood there waiting.

I didn't even notice when a figure materialized in front of him, wrapped in a long cloak. They exchanged a couple of words which sounded suspiciously like a coded phrase and its response. Then we continued moving.

This time, it wasn't very far. I could now make out patches of light seeping through the thick veil of darkness — like an unsteady glow produced by a bright torch covered with a torn quilt.

Soon the veil lifted, flooding the scene with light.

This was a camp — a proper hikers' camp with lots of large tents which looked more like tarp mansions set under a high dome. Yellow amberlike crystals were mounted on long poles over each of them, serving as the main source of light. Plus the already-familiar greenish glow along the dome's perimeter, the same they'd cast on Shoss' shack earlier. This was some kind of protective spell — only this time it was cast from the inside.

Predictably, we were immediately surrounded by all kinds of creatures, from Abbases to orange-skinned Purgs. The latter, by the way, made up the majority. Which actually wasn't surprising. Their world was a veritable powder keg. It was a far cry from our Cesspit where everything was good-mannered. As soon as a Purg becomes a Player, he does what he's supposed to do: namely, flees his home world.

"Are you taking us to their ruler?" I asked Manipulator.

He cringed but replied, "There are no rulers here."

He didn't expand on it. Still, Stealther spoke instead,

"Each mercenary group has its designated area. Each group pays the Treasurer for their keep, in order to support the Stronghold. This camp, I mean. We call it the Stronghold."

"And how do you solve any major problems?"

"It's the council of bosses who decide. By majority vote."

"Enough of your BS," Manipulator cut him short. "You shouldn't forget who he is. Next thing you'll be telling him where we keep our weapons and how we hide from the spiders."

He was admittedly a man's man. There was just no way you could get on his good side. And judging by the wary glances that local mercs cast in his direction, I wasn't the only person who was afraid of him. Virtually no

one had dared to come over and strike up a conversation with him — and the few that had, only received monosyllabic answers. So much shit in such a tiny person.

Finally, we stopped at one of the smaller tents. It looked admittedly weird, especially because it was guarded by two huge Archali.

A husky voice came from inside, singing rather pleasantly,

“I’ve lived the life that’s full, I traveled each and every highway...”

Not as artistically as Frank Sinatra might have done, but his performance had its good points.

For some reason, the sound of his singing made Manipulator furious. Either he disapproved of his repertoire — or maybe of the performer himself. He started cussing like a trooper.

Still, I almost didn’t hear it.

Because the time was come.

The gray Avatar — which I’d kept on throughout our journey — filled up with force. It had been exactly three days since my karma had been annulled.

The long-awaited lines appeared in my interface.

You’ve unlocked auxiliary abilities of the Divine Avatar: ***Reaper****. Unlocking auxiliary abilities requires a neutral karma for a minimum of 9 days.*

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Chapter 13

LIFE, AS WE ALL WELL KNOW, is a series of choices we make every day. Some of them monumental, others insignificant; some capable of changing the destinies of many people, others only consequential for you.

And what's even more important is not just making a choice but making sure the timing is right. You should never be too hasty nor too slow, but strike a happy medium.

As I stared at the interface messages, sensing the Avatar's force growing within me, I took the opportunity to do some quality thinking.

You've unlocked auxiliary abilities of the Divine Avatar: ***Reaper****. Unlocking auxiliary abilities requires a neutral karma for a minimum of 9 days.*

Bone Lord. *Creates a powerful servant for the summoner who will attack those of his master's enemies closest to him. Every killing performed by the Bone Lord adds +10% to the summoner's hitpoints in case of the summoner's injury.*

Duration: 2 min

Cooldown: 3 days

Deadly Shadow. *Transforms the caster into a lethal shadow highly resistant to all physical damage. You will, however, remain vulnerable to magic. The killings performed in the shape of Deadly Shadow doesn't allow the caster gain any avatars, spells or new development branches.*

Duration: 1 min

Cooldown: 4 days

***Waltzing on Bones** gives +2% to the caster's speed with every killing.*
Duration: 2 min
Cooldown: 2 days

What prevented me from activating them all at once and scattering the surrounding mercs like skittles? Discretion, most likely. The old Sergei Demidov would have already been fighting the entire camp with abandon — but the new me kept thinking and calculating, trying to come up with the best-case scenario.

One thing that made me uncomfortable was the notice saying that Deadly Shadow would prevent me from gaining new development branches. How was I supposed to get back to the Gatehouse, then? If what Manipulator had said about the spiders' constantly changing routes, the map would be no good to me whatsoever.

The other option was to wait until Deadly Shadow expired, then kill one of the mercs and gain his development branch. There was a drawback to that, though. How was I supposed to find out which of the mercs possessed the ability I needed? One thing's for sure: Cyclone definitely didn't have it, and I had my doubts he'd be patiently waiting for me to revert from Deadly Shadow to my regular human self. Plus, I still wasn't sure if I'd manage to kill him at all.

And thirdly, I still had to get out of the camp. Which was quite big and very densely populated by Players with all kinds of unpredictable abilities. Which was another reason I wasn't in a hurry.

Also, It looked like now of all moments no one seemed to be impatient to see the color of my blood. No one was after my Avatars right now. The guy — or the Purg, rather, who was supposed to analyze my humble abilities — was lying on the floor in front of me right now, trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey with leather straps, and singing *My Way*, of all things. His development branch said he was an ***Analyst***.

Which, of course, made one wonder.

“When did it happen?” Manipulator asked an Abbas Player standing next to Analyst.

“A couple of hours ago. We grabbed him just as he was trying to get out of the Stronghold.”

“Dammit! That means he’ll be out of it for at least another twelve hours.”

“Why, are there problems?” I ventured.

Manipulator predictably ignored my question. The Abbas just twitched his head growths.

But as for Analyzer, he seemed to take a sudden interest in my humble self.

“Greetings, my friend,” he wheezed. “Welcome to this glorious shithole that these idiots call the Stronghold. My name’s Ames. I’m obliged to share this mortal body with some idiot called Archie. He’s a real moron. These clowns use him to do their dirty work for them. Normally, it’s him who runs this bag of bones but I do get to be in the driving seat occasionally, too.”

“Shut up!” Manipulator barked.

“Go and order your lapdogs around, or whoever you’re sleeping with,” Ames quipped haughtily through clenched teeth.

“Are you a schizo?” I asked.

He paused theatrically as if giving some weight to my words. “You could say so, I suppose.”

“Enough! Take them away!” Manipulator said, pointing at Arts and myself. “Let me know when Archie’s back.”

“Hey dude!” Ames shouted to me as I was being taken away. “Take me with you when you do a runner! I can see you’re quite capable of doing that. Take me with you! I know every bolt hole here. You won’t regret it.”

“Yeah right. You think you’re frog princess or something?” Arts murmured.

Still, his offer set me thinking. Life hadn’t prepared me for anything like this. Then again, maybe it had. Few people would have been able to handle all this sudden avalanche of information about their true nature — not to mention the very existence of the Game running a huge undercover network of worlds. It had never occurred to me that someone might simply crack under the weight of their new lifestyle, just like this Archie-turned-Ames had.

Admittedly, his illness couldn’t have come in any handier.

As I pondered over all of this, we were being led to our new “penitentiary”: a tent of about nine by twelve feet, with a single plank bed and no facilities whatsoever. Apparently, they didn’t expect to keep us here for long.

Personally, I had no intention of hanging around here for very long, either. I just watched calmly as the sides of the tent hardened, the familiar green glow of the protection spell seeping through the seams.

“Listen, Arts,” I said. “If a Player is a schizo, do you think he has access to his other personality’s abilities?”

Arts shrugged. “Why not? Why would you want his ability? Because you are talking about Ames, aren’t you?”

“I am indeed. Only it’s not his abilities I need. Listen up.”

I explained my plan to her unhurriedly, stopping occasionally to give some consideration to the details.

Arts listened to me very closely — as if we weren’t prisoners in a spiders’ world but rather sipping coffee in a Parisian croissanterie enjoying a view of the Eiffel tower. Players must be the only people capable of distancing themselves from reality like this, taking all danger as part of the deal.

“Excuse me!” I said, walking over to the tent’s entrance. I knew of course that the protective spell wouldn’t allow me to leave — but I was sure they could hear me. “No offence, but can one use the bathroom here? It’s not a nice thing to say in front of a lady, but I really have to go.”

Cloneer, Cyclone and Freezer who’d been posted to guard us pretended that my problem didn’t concern them. Then again, maybe it didn’t. Maybe Manipulator simply hadn’t briefed them on what to do under such circumstances.

That’s the main drawback of any authoritarian regime. The more power concentrated in your own hands, the less initiative in the field. Still, I wasn’t thinking that far ahead. All I needed was for them to remove the protection spell.

Which was why I started screeching like a banshee.

Cyclone was the first to crack. He wasn’t very patient at the best of times. Although I couldn’t hear what he was saying to Cloneer, the latter nodded and started cloning himself until he maxed himself out at five perfectly identical copies.

Freezer — who was standing some distance away from them — must have understood what was going on and raised his hands, ready to pour all of the considerable power of his spells on me.

Yeah right. With an escort like that, you don’t need a laxative.

Still, Freezer hadn’t shown me his whole capacity quite yet. He must have been some sort of chief mage in their group. And seeing as it had been him who’d cast the protection, it was he who would now have to lift it.

And I — I’d already donned my Avatar’s mask, watching the green glow disappear.

Oh well. Let the fun and games begin!

I saved Bone Lord for later. I still didn’t know how powerful the summoned creature might be. So I had only myself to count on.

I activated Waltzing on Bones and Deadly Shadow. And if the former was rather discreet, the latter came with the kinds of bells and whistles worthy of James Cameron’s special effects crew.

A thick cloud of dark slate-gray smoke enveloped me. Almost immediately it dissipated, revealing my new guise to this here spider world: the Deadly Shadow.

Wish I could see myself right now. The sight must have been impressive.

I was no longer human. Clad in tattered black robes, I was holding a battle scythe in a hand which I almost didn’t feel.

Also, I had no legs. They ended somewhere below my knees, offering no explanation as to how I continued to hover in mid-air instead of dropping to the ground.

I reached for my Moon Steel dagger, only to be faced with an unpleasant surprise.

My inventory had been blocked.

There you go. So this scythe wasn’t just part of costume jewelry. It was an actual weapon I was supposed to fight with.

As I pondered over my makeover, the mercs seemed to have come round somewhat. Cyclone turned on his blower, trying to force me down to the ground, while Freezer hurried to reactivate his protective spell.

Oh well. I had no inventory anymore — but at least I hoped that my main ability still worked.

[∞]

Well, thank God for that! Now we could do our thing.

I reactivated my Avatar’s abilities and darted forward as I transformed. Freezer had only just finished removing the protection — while Cyclone hadn’t yet managed to appraise the situation.

Admittedly, I wasn’t the most adept with a scythe — but I still managed to graze the orc’s leg.

The weapon exceeded my wildest expectations. I just hadn’t expected his leg to go flying like a serrano ham. No idea what this scythe was made of, but whatever it was, I was a fan.

My second blow made quick work of the clone nearest to me. Bones, tendons, muscle, internal organs — the scythe went through all of them like a hot knife through butter.

The remaining clones attacked. At that point, my reflexes kicked in. I dodged a blow from one of them and ducked out of a second one’s reach, only to get whacked by a third one.

His sword ripped through my robes. Thick smoke billowed from the wound. But — nothing. No pain. No weakness. Didn’t the description say ‘high resistance to physical damage’?

[∞]

I didn’t try to defend myself. I didn’t retreat in order to regroup. I just kept on attacking them. I knocked the nearest clone down with the scythe’s handle, slashed another’s belly open, then took a hearty swing and lopped the third one’s head off before turning back to the first one to finish him off.

Your Pole Weapon skill has increased to level 11.

Funnily, all of these clones were indeed living creatures. Not immaterial illusions but the actual parts of the Player who’d summoned them and who was now getting weaker with every moment.

Unlike myself. Although not exactly any stronger, I was certainly getting a lot quicker. This Waltzing on Bones may have worked inconspicuously but it was definitely more than adequate.

As I sprang toward the last clone, I already knew that I was a tad faster than him. I’d almost taken a swing with my scythe when a clap of thunder came from above, showering me with hailstones which stripped me of a whole load of hitpoints.

Dammit! I’d forgotten all about Freezer, hadn’t I?

[∞]

I finished off the fourth clone and dashed toward the caster. Judging by his saucer eyes, he was either about to take a dump or he was simply very scared. He even stopped casting *Hail*, apparently realizing he wouldn’t make it, and thrust his hand out, about to recite a supplementary spell.

I ducked aside as I felt my flank being burnt. My health bar began to shrink. The air filled with a thick inky cloud billowing from my freshly mauled wound.

Yes, yes, I remember. I was still vulnerable to magic.

I bounded up to Freezer in two big leaps, knocked him over with the scythe's shaft, then lopped his head off with a single expert swing as if I'd been doing it all my life.

His head tumbled aside, then crumbled to a large heap of dust.

Your fame has increased to 29.

I swung round, taking stock of the remaining opponents. Cloneer was the only one left of any importance: he stood holding his sword outstretched in front of him. Cyclone was lying down gushing blood everywhere, holding his severed leg as if hoping to stick it back somehow. At least he wasn't screaming.

I suddenly realized that my head was surprisingly clear as if I'd just woken up or had a dip in an ice hole. My thoughts were lucid and precise. It was probably the +2% to Speed I'd received because I seemed to be thinking quicker too.

Killing Cloneer wasn't that difficult. I feigned a movement, and he swallowed it — and by the time he'd realized it was a feint he didn't have time to parry my next attack. The whole curved blade of my scythe sank into his ribs. I yanked it free, only to be showered with blood and then with dust.

Your Pole Weapon skill has increased to level 12.

Your fame has increased to 30.

What the hell had they done to earn me an extra Fame point for every kill? Then again, it was hardly a mystery. These were mercenaries living at the very heart of the spiders' world who'd even built some semblance of a camp city at its midst. They were powerful, strong and treacherous. So they were obliged to be quite famous — or infamous, which in this case was irrelevant. It stood to reason that whenever one of them was killed, it immediately became known. Admittedly, I was yet to find out how this bush telephone worked but the idea remained the same.

All this flashed through my head as I flew at the orc who was still lying on the ground bleeding to death. Was he too stunned to defend himself? No idea. Not that I cared. Judging by the blood loss, he had very little time left.

I took another swing with my scythe.

Your fame has increased to 31.

"Arts, now!"

The sound of my own voice surprised me. It wasn't exactly mine. It was dead and hissing like a gust of freezing wind atop a high mountain.

Still, Arts had heard me. The side of the tent ripped open under a sword blow. Arts promptly emerged; she swung round to face me, then froze in terror, apparently oblivious to everything around her.

I was obliged to bring her back down to earth.

"Follow me, quick!" I hissed as I floated forward.

The assassination of seven creatures in quick succession (with special compliments to Cloneer) allowed me to move rather quickly. Arts could barely keep up with me. Luckily, unlike my inventory, my interface seemed to be working just fine. I would check the map, then advance to the tent I was looking for.

Throughout the whole distance we only came across one merc who wasn’t even part of our group. I paused momentarily, remembering I couldn’t attack him first. If yours truly was unlucky enough to smoke a neutral Player, you could forget the whole operation.

Still, the merc didn’t let me down. He forged ahead at me, simultaneously reaching for a spear from his inventory — then dropped to the ground half a head shorter.

Incredible! They were all so slow now!

I saw Manipulator hanging about quite close to the tent I was looking for. To be more accurate, it was him who saw me. He screamed like a sick calf about to be culled. Which was probably very close to the truth.

I was about to tackle him when a knife’s smoking blade poked out of my chest. Stealther! I’d forgotten all about him.

Another turn, another swing with my scythe — and his Stealth mode ended, his materializing body crumbling to dust at my feet. The knife followed suit: all it had done was rip through my robes.

Your fame has increased to 32.

“Do your thing, Arts. I’ll sort this out myself here.”

She dived into the tent. I heard the sounds of steel against steel, followed by a suppressed cry. I wasn’t worried about Arts in the slightest. Any angry girl is a power to be reckoned with — and Arts also had the surprise effect on her side.

Something I wish I could say about myself.

Manipulator’s screaming had attracted a lot of attention. Players came running to the scene: some Purgs, a couple of Kabirids and an extra orc as

well as a little dude like I'd never seen before, his body studded with a plethora of double-digited limbs. Who did he think he was — a sloth?

Still, I was much more interested in a short guy with a hi tech cannon he had just pointed in my direction.

Everything that followed happened surprisingly quickly even for me.

I only managed to take a couple of steps when I saw the flash of a missile shoot past me like a bullet. Although it didn't even graze me, I caught a considerable shock wave.

The nearest tents were blown away like a bunch of tea towels on a clothes line. Unfortunately, that included the one where Arts was taking refuge together with our newfound friend. Luckily for them, Manipulator had been aiming at me — and I'd managed to take a few steps aside just before it had happened.

Thank God — or whoever was up there, I wasn't even sure anymore — my cooldown hadn't lasted long. I got back to my feet and examined myself. My body was billowing more smoke — either they had indeed hit me or my Deadly Shadow was about to expire. In any case, sorting out Manipulator was becoming a priority.

Admittedly, I was quite disappointed. I knew of course that a sea captain doesn't necessarily have to know how to swim — but you'd expect of a merc commander to be a better fighter than Manipulator turned out to be. He was no match for this sped up version of myself that couldn't be killed in hand-to-hand combat. He had of course managed to wound me, only to lose first his hand and then his head.

Your Pole Weapon skill has increased to level 13.

Your fame has increased to 33.
Your fame has increased to 34.
Your fame has increased to 35.

Your fame has increased to 36.

That was generous! I looked at my freshly-fixed prosthetic arm, feeling a lump forming in my throat. That was the end of my most powerful ability. It had just expired.

Sorry, guys. I hadn’t meant to do you in.

Bone Lord materialized right in front of me as if shielding the stupid me from any potential enemies. He looked like the skeleton of a giant, standing a good head taller than myself. Clad in a breastplate, with a full-length shield and a long rust-eaten sword, the Bone Lord inspired trepidation. You couldn’t help freezing on the spot as you looked at him.

Which was exactly what I needed.

I’d have loved to stay and watch the unfolding scrap. I really needed to know the limits of this giant’s power. Still, my self-preservation instinct screamed at me: “Run, you idiot! Run!”

So run I did. But first, I scooped up everything that Manipulator had dropped and shoved it into my own inventory.

Then I ran like hell.

Luckily for me, Arts had already managed to disentangle herself from the collapsed tent, pulling the freed-up Ames behind her. The latter looked rather confused — but I categorically didn’t have the time to spend on stabilizing his schizophrenia. In a couple of minutes, the whole camp would be after us.

So I just grabbed Ames by the shoulders and almost shouted my sole question at him:

“Can you get us out of here?”

His gaze regained its lucidity. He gave me a long look, then nodded with a grin which returned the familiar cheeky expression to his face.

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Chapter 14

A GIFT THAT'S ANTICIPATED and that's been given to you by your loyal friends always makes you feel good. But a gift that's presented to you by an enemy and which also turns out to be wonderful beyond your wildest dreams makes you truly jump for joy.

Admittedly, now wasn't the right moment to celebrate. Besides, there were even more reasons for me to keep my mouth shut. Firstly, because we were on the run, weaving our way pretty quickly between the tents. Secondly, because if my health bar were to be believed, my earlier stint in the guise of Deadly Shadow had taken its toll on my stats.

And thirdly, because I still couldn't wrap my head around what I'd just laid my hands on.

Still, after a few sharp turns (and I still had no idea where Ames was taking us, seeing as we'd arrived here by a completely different route), I just couldn't take it any longer and took another peep into my inventory at Manipulator's gift. Because even my own parents hadn't been so generous on my last birthday.

I'd apparently won the main prize: the very gun with which Manipulator had tried to kill me with earlier.

It looked impressive as hell. From the back, it looked like an ordinary hunting rifle, even its butt appeared to be carved out of a piece of wood (although I had a funny feeling it was an imitation). But if you looked at it from the front, that's where it started to get strange. On either side of the

barrel was a long rectangular strip of steel which made me think of a railway track. The space next to them was crowded with all kinds of dials and buttons, plus some huge transparent contraption below, filled with a dirty brown substance.

Mobile EMI booster beam S-6
Battery type: Plutonium
Charge: 84%
Firing modes: Regular projectiles
Projectile speed: 5 miles/sec
Energy cost: 8%
Plasma projectiles:
Energy cost: 4 %

I mentally christened it a “railgun” because judging by the ammo that Manipulator had fired at me earlier, this thing was a plasma gun. And even then I hadn’t known what had hit me.

Talking about ammo, it came with some of that as well. Small rounds, almost toylike, were neatly packed in a case, four in total.

Cumulative ammunition for Mobile EMI booster beam S-6

That was the extent of it. They could have at least mentioned how it was supposed to work. Wouldn’t you be curious?

But that wasn’t the only thing Manipulator had bequeathed me. He still had that steel box on many spindly legs that Shoss had fixed for him — meaning that he’d dropped it upon his death too.

Minor DNA Transmutator

Suitable for controlled genetic mutations in humanoid-class creatures

Current level of mutagenic agent: 34%

This was just a bunch of empty words to me, of course — but I still managed to glean a couple of things from it. Firstly, it was apparently in working order. Secondly, it still had 30% charge in it. Which meant I could still use it. All that I still had to find out was how I could use the wretched thing.

And finally, as if trying to buy me off, Manipulator left me 2306 grams of dust. Even disregarding our recent traveling expenses, I now had 9,5 kilos of dust lining my pocket. Mr. Scrooge, eat your heart out.

Also, you shouldn't forget, as it's well known, that dead men have no need for money. Which meant that in order to spend all this windfall I first needed to get out of this wretched tent city and ideally, out of this spiders' world entirely.

"Over there," Ames said yet again, pointing a nebulous hand.

"What's there?"

The question hung in the air — because both Arts and our schizo guide gave me an uncomprehending look.

"Serge," Arts ventured, "if you want us to understand you, you should speak slower. And stop swallowing your words."

That wretched *Waltzing on Bones*! Apparently, it affected my speech patterns too. I was obliged to repeat what I'd just said, enunciating every word.

This time they understood me. Even Ames gave a reserved nod and embarked on a series of explanations with the help of his hands,

"By now, the central exit is already shut," he drawled unhurriedly. "We can get out further on. There're fewer people there. I'll try to disable a small part of the protection dome."

“What do you mean, you’ll try?” I asked menacingly. “I thought that you knew what you were doing! If you try to take me for a ride, I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” Ames said through clenched teeth, glaring at me. “What’ll you do to me? Kill me? But I practically don’t even exist. I’m only an appendage, a sick extension of my real identity. You can’t threaten someone who has nothing left to lose. You and I will never be friends. We’re just travel companions heading for the same destination. I want you to remember it well. Then just stick your tongue up your stupid backside and stop trying to talk about things you don’t know zilch about.”

To say I was surprised would have been an understatement. His bitterness surprised me. After all, I’d just made quick work of his tormenters and set him free, hadn’t I?

Still, I of all people could understand him. The memory of my rubbing shoulders with the Darkest One still smarted in my own soul. Not that that was something that Ames needed to know.

Besides, two more very interesting things had just happened. Firstly, I felt as if I’d just resurfaced after a deep-water dive. The surrounding sounds had regained their clarity; my friends’ movements weren’t in slo-mo anymore. Which meant that my Waltzing on Bones must have expired.

And secondly, my hitpoints had grown considerably, meaning that my Bone Lord was still alive and kicking here somewhere, giving the local mercs a good run for their money. Such a shame I couldn’t watch him fight. It could be a very enlightening experience.

We ran a bit further, then huddled behind one of the tents. From here, we had a good view of the main entrance which was the only place free from their protection spell. And it was already quite crowded.

So much for me thinking that mercenaries had discipline issues — apparently they didn’t. Far from that. Their impromptu defense seemed to be very well organized.

“So what are we gonna do?” I whispered.

“You could try and fire at them with that big gun you’ve got,” Ames helpfully suggested.

I shook my head. “I can’t. Some of them may be neutral to me.”

“Would you like me to fire it for you?” Arts offered, looking me pleadingly in the eye. “My karma needs dropping, anyway.”

I gave her a doubtful look. She’d never been the bloodthirsty kind. Still, she looked confident enough, apparently prepared to do whatever it took to get us out of here.

So I reached into my inventory and handed her the gun.

She studied it closely. “It looks like it should come with some ammo. You don’t happen to have any, do you?”

“Actually, I do.”

Between the two of us, we even managed to load that monstrosity. Honestly, my chest groaned with guilt. It’s one thing to smoke a bunch of attackers bent on killing you — but firing this uber weapon of mass destruction at a crowd of unsuspecting people was something entirely different.

Still, it was too late to reconsider. The lots had been cast. Arts was ready to fire our trophy gun.

Such a shame Waltzing on Bones had expired. Because what happened next completely dumbfounded me, almost burying me under the rushing sequence of events.

Everything seemed to have happened simultaneously. Arts pulled the trigger. But instead of firing at the entrance, the gun's barrel jerked upwards, loosing off a round at the dome overhead.

The slug pierced its shimmering shield, ripping through the night's gloom.

The green glow expired instantly, snapping like the filament inside a light bulb when you throw a wet rag over it.

An explosion resounded at the very center of the camp, tearing at the nearest tents with cascades of white shrapnel and trampling the mercs who'd happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Then darkness fell. The last thing I saw was Arts flying backwards to the ground from the gun's recoil.

After that, something snapped within me again, slowing the picture down and restoring the normal tempo of events. I heard the mercs cussing, their voices strained to near hysterical.

A ripped flap of the dome fluttered in the wind. Flashes of magic light came from different directions, unable to dispel the thick darkness that enveloped us.

"Arts," I whispered, even though no one could hear us in this racket. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. You've got to find the gun, I've dropped it. You can't imagine how much Fame I got for this. And the bottom has fallen out of my Reputation with the mercs."

I cast Light, shielding it with the other hand rather pointlessly, and promptly found the gun. Then I helped Arts back to her feet.

“Have you ever fired a gun before?” I asked, beginning to guess the cause of these spectacular fireworks.

“Yeah, sort of,” Arts said, shrugging non-committally. “My Firearm skill was at 6. Now it’s at 7.”

“You don’t mean it! You got a new level for this! And how are we supposed to get out now?”

“No sweat,” Ames said. He walked over to the dome’s edge, produced a knife and sliced through the fabric. “Without the protection spell, this is just a piece of tarp,” he explained. “We’d better get out of here quick. Very soon every spider in the area will be here.”

I climbed outside. The cold wind tousled my hair. It was just as dark here as it was inside, so I thought that my still-active Light came in very handy.

Still, Ames turned to me and cast a meaningful look at the light. “Put it out,” he commanded. “You don’t want to attract attention.”

He waited for Arts to get out, then continued, “Now remember. Walk directly behind me. No wandering off. No light. Not a sound. If you behave, we just might get to the Gatehouse without much trouble. Off you go now. We don’t have much time.”

“What was it you said about the spiders coming here?” I asked as soon as we’d left the dome behind. Or at least I hoped we had, because you couldn’t see jack in this thick darkness other than the vague outlines of the people nearest to you.

“What part of ‘not a sound’ don’t you understand?” he hissed back.

“Okay,” I mouthed, “so what about the spiders?”

“Wait a sec. Let’s go a bit further first.”

After about three minutes of brisk walking, Ames crouched next to a small boulder.

“The camp’s integrity is supported by three main spells,” he began to explain. “A Shape spell ensures the dome’s stable form but doesn’t protect it against physical damage. That’s something that the Protection spell does, which in turn can’t defend the camp from the spiders. That’s where the third spell comes into play: namely, Smoke and Mirrors for non-sentient creatures.”

I very nearly blurted I had one of those too, only for commoners. Still, I bit my tongue just in time.

“The first spell is relatively long-lasting,” he continued. “We cast it by hand — I mean, one of our mages does. Easy. The other two require a shedload of mana, so we hooked them up to this Arnorhallian crystal we had. The crystal was supposed to last us 140 local years. But this female friend of yours somehow managed to damage the protection — which should be impossible by definition — so that all the energy used to support the dome was channeled back, destroying the crystal. So now our fabled Stronghold is sitting at the very center of a spiders’ world, completely exposed. How long do you think it might take the real bosses of this place to realize they’ve just been served a lavish dinner?”

As if confirming his words, the sky about three hundred yards away from us lit up with colorful flashes of spells. Guns began rattling. The screeching of the giant monsters sliced through the air as they dropped with a nauseating crackling noise.

After the total darkness, the blinding light assaulted our eyes, forcing us to shield them with our hands. Still, I managed to glimpse a few giant spindly legs covered in long hard hairs. Sharp mandibles... hard chitinous bodies...

The spiders were huge — but still they could be killed. I watched one of the biggest ones as an impressive gunshot blew its head to smithereens.

Still, as they kept surging onto the camp, I realized that their power wasn't in their size but in their sheer numbers. The larger ones reminded me of heavy battleships drawing the enemy's fire to themselves while the smaller ones were like agile destroyer boats busy dealing damage.

"Oh Jesus," Arts murmured under her breath.

At first I thought she was commenting on the grandiose battle unfurling before our eyes, but she hurried to explain,

"Fame just keeps growing. It just won't stop."

Ames nodded. "That's right. By destroying the dome, you wiped away the Stronghold. It's true that few people knew its exact location — but everyone in the Central World knew what it was. So you just might wake up a new celebrity next morning, lady."

"How much is your Fame now?" I asked.

"Forty-two," she replied.

"So! That's more than I have! And what about your karma?"

"It dropped low enough, so my Avatar's active again."

"Well, if you have nothing else to discuss, we might just as well get going," Ames said, getting back to his feet.

"What about all the mercs?" I asked, pointing at the flashes of light. "Think they can do it on their own?"

Ames shrugged. "How am I supposed to know? Ideally, they need to repel the first attack and then run for their lives. But it's in your own

interests that they all get killed now.”

Unfortunately, he was right. Being soft could only backfire in the future. Sooner or later, all the surviving mercs were bound to work out how it had happened. Considering Art’s soaring Fame numbers, it wouldn’t take them long to put two and two together. And I was pretty sure these dudes should have quite a few friends in the Central Worlds...

Meanwhile, Ames kept leading us out. Not in a straight line, if the map was to be believed, but seeing as we hadn’t met a single spider throughout our entire journey, he was indeed a decent guide who moved confidently, only occasionally stopping and peering at something on the ground. Personally, I could see nothing in this darkness. Admittedly, by now my eyes had adapted to it somewhat but still there was no way I could make out any finer details.

That’s why, when he stopped yet again, we weren’t worried in the slightest, even though he seemed to be lingering longer than usual. Then he hunched up, almost doubling up as if in a fit of pain.

“You okay?” I asked him.

“I’m fine. Got a stomach ache, that’s all,” he replied.

After a while, he stood up straight as if nothing had happened. Then he did something very strange. He bolted off, disappearing into the gloom.

I stood flabbergasted, completely at a loss as to what might have prompted him to do it. I even drew my railgun, seeing it still had plenty of battery to scorch a few stalking spiders if needs be. But I could see no spiders around.

“Ames?” I asked softly. “Ames? Ames, dammit!”

“Who the hell are you? And what did that nutter promise you?”

It was Ames' voice but still it was different. Ames had this brazen streak to his manner, but this guy seemed to be afraid of his own shadow.

Then it dawned on me. "Is that Archie?"

"How do you know me? Who are you?" the 'stranger' demanded.

"Listen Arch, we had a bit of an agreement with Ames here," I said.

"I've got nothing to do with that swindler!"

Okay, okay, wrong pickup line. Apparently, this dude hated his alter ego. Let's see if we could use it to our advantage.

[∞]

"...Who are you?"

"We're your friends. The mercs asked us to take you to a good doctor who might help you get rid of Ames once and for all."

"I don't believe you. I need to speak to Brot."

No idea who that Brot was. All I wanted was to give this schizo a good shaking. We needed his pathfinding skill in order to get to the Gates. The problem was, we didn't have the slightest idea where we were right now. I even risked casting Light, sweeping my glowing hand around me to show him where we were.

Not that it helped a lot.

"I need to speak to Brot," he insisted. "I need to go back to the Stronghold."

“I’m afraid your Stronghold has been compromised,” I said. “It’s being reclaimed by the spiders even as we speak. Not a good idea going back there.”

All I heard in response was the clatter of rocks rolling down the slope and the sound of distancing footsteps.

Bastard! What made me think there was only one road to the camp? It looked like this Archie had just found another one. Damn!

I could still rewind time again, of course. It had been less than four seconds. Still, I only had enough charges left for one single try — and my Intuition, which I’d learned to respect just lately, suggested it would be wasted on him.

Archie was quite a piece of work. And it looked like his split personality wasn’t the worst of his mental problems.

“Damn,” Arts spoke. “Great timing. So what are we gonna do now, Mr. Negotiating Expert?”

“What *can* we do? We’ll just keep going. All the spiders must be moving toward the camp now, which gives us a decent chance of getting to the Gate without meeting any. But we need to do it quickly.”

By then, the sounds of the battle behind us were beginning to die away. The flashes and arcs of spells weren’t slicing through the sky quite so often; the gunshots were few and far between. Either the spiders were prevailing, or the mercs had managed to fend them off. Neither option meant much to us — but the latter one suggested that the mercs might head for the Gates afterward.

So we had to get there first.

I drew the railgun — which just like any other weapon made one feel so much more self-sufficient — and motioned for Arts to follow. Then,

realizing my blunder, I whispered to her to keep after me.

Judging by the map, the Gatehouse wasn't that far: five minutes of brisk walk at the most. But that if you headed there directly, trespassing on the spiders' invisible trails.

Still, funny as it may sound in pitch blackness, I literally saw no other way. So we set off, trying to walk as fast as the sharp rocks underfoot allowed us.

I soon realized the danger of our decision. I leaned on a boulder to muster yet another slope — but it felt unpleasantly prickly to touch. And once it stirred with a nauseating screech, rubbing against other rocks, I realized something else:

Some spiders hadn't gone to the camp.

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Chapter 15

IN THE HISTORY OF THE WILD WEST, there was this very simple adage: “Shoot first, ask questions later.” Admittedly, humanity has come quite a long way since — but right now, this barbaric method of negotiation had saved our collective bacon.

I recoiled, readying the railgun. I wished I had some source of light, however weak, just to see where my opponent was. Right now I was obliged to fire blind, second-guessing the spider’s position. Still, I didn’t have the time: neither to ask Arts to cast some sort of light nor to ask the spider to sit still and let me get a good aim at him.

I pressed the gun butt against my shoulder. Remembering its frightful recoil, I stood tight, then pulled the trigger.

For a split second, I was blinded by light and fear. Firstly, because I finally saw the monster towering over me. Just as I’d thought, he was very close. Secondly, because despite my rather decent (compared to Arts) Firearms skill, I’d still failed to hit what I’d been aiming at.

One of the spider’s limbs flew aside, showering the nearest rocks with a dark brown liquid. The monster gnashed its mandibles, apparently intending to have me for dinner. No idea whether he realized he’d be munching on handfuls of dust.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 33.

I barely had time to glimpse the message before the darkness reinstated itself. True, I'd hit him, you had to give me that. But I'd also found myself in quite a pickle. Because what can be worse than a big bad spider? Only a big, bad and very angry one.

My railgun was blinking its indicators like a Christmas tree. What I really didn't like was that most of them were red.

Already realizing what must have happened, I tugged the trigger several times, with no result. The spider's mandibles chattered over me like a clap of thunder, their deafening sound ripping through both the silence and my hopes of getting out of here.

That's when Arts managed to surprise me. She didn't freak out. No tears, no damsel-in-distress behavior, no closing her eyes in expectation of a quick death. Arts approached the problem with the businesslike cool typical of her. The way she dealt with it was as if she was facing a tiny insect and not this behemoth of a spider.

So she launched several fireballs in quick succession into his black bulk.

Which sort of helped. Not to defeat him, you understand — the spider still remained an unassailable mobile bastion. But at least now I could take stock of the situation and deduce that we still had a chance. Because as soon as the long hard hair on his legs caught fire, I managed to see something very peculiar in his behavior.

Although he kept coming in our direction, he didn't appear very stable. His legs kept breaking under his weight, forcing him to move in leaps and bounds as if he was afraid of collapsing.

I ran a few steps away from Arts to make sure she had an escape corridor if my plan failed. With shaking hands, I produced another round for my railgun. It was small but very heavy. As I loaded, I cast pleading looks at the indicators, retreating all the while.

In the meantime, Arts kept peppering him with fireballs until he looked like a glowing airstrip in the night sky. Still, the spider ignored her entirely, zeroing in on me, as if he could sense that I was the main threat.

Despite being clumsy and slow, he still caught up with me in the end. I was just a tiny mite, after all, compared to his towering bulk. One of his enflamed limbs shot up and came down on me, knocking me off my feet. The blow was so hard I momentarily lost my bearings, slightly stunned.

And when I came round, I saw his sharp mandibles looming before my eyes.

[∞]

I ducked aside, holding the gun in one hand and covering myself from the spider’s leg with the other. It worked quite well. This time his blow only glanced off me, my prosthetic arm serving as an impromptu shield.

The rocks next to me cracked, crumbling under the impact of his descending limb. I glanced at the gun and couldn’t conceal my joy: with a click, one of the indicators turned to green.

The spider must have been really surprised to see such a petty little flea causing so much trouble. He probably hadn’t even managed to work out what had killed him.

His tiny head exploded into cascades of vile, putrid flesh. The spider crashed noisily to the ground, raising clouds of dust.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 34.

I stood there gasping, still reeling from the effects of the adrenaline rush, wiping the bits of the spider’s flesh off my face. My knees were buckling; my eyes stung with sweat.

Arts ran over to me. “Serge, are you okay?”

“Absolutely,” I replied, inspecting my prosthetic arm. It still seemed to be in one piece. I really had no desire to go back to Shoss to have it fixed again. I just didn’t appreciate the company he kept.

By now, the spider’s legs had almost burned out, giving off a very weak glow. I was obliged to cast Light, so as not to stay in the dark.

I checked the map. We only had one little iota of the fog of war left to cover before we ended up at the Gatehouse.

Provided we moved quickly. I had a funny feeling that all the racket we’d raised might attract the few monsters who hadn’t left for the camp. Because, judging by the heap of dead meat in front of me, they just had to be somewhere close. They could only be a few but that didn’t make them any less dangerous.

“Come on, Arts, let’s move it,” I said, grabbing her by the sleeve.

“No, wait. I think I know how he ended up here.”

“Does it make any difference? Hurry up!”

“Give me a few secs. I’m gonna show you something.”

I paused, hesitant, suppressing the desire to yell at her. Instead, I took a couple of deep breaths and tilted my head inquiringly.

Arts waved her hand, inviting me to follow her. Without waiting for the answer, she started scrambling over the rocks, heading in the direction we’d come from.

She cast a pre-spell to light her way. A pre-spell is a spell’s initial phase, a bit like warming up a car’s motor before setting off. Thanks to this,

I could at least follow her progress, seeing as we hadn’t gone very far anyway.

Very soon we were back to the spot where I’d first encountered the spider. Arts walked around a heap of rocks, then thrust her hand out, pointing at something.

Lighting my own way, I walked over closer to inspect what she’d found.

To be honest, it was really weird. The whole area was strewn with crumpled Jerry cans. I counted at least several dozen of them.

“What the hell’s that?”

“That’s all that’s left of the group that was sent here to collect some aetylene.”

“Collect what?”

“Well, that’s what they call the liquid that you find in large spiders. Aetylene. It’s used as a coolant in the fusion reactors fitted to Central World spaceships. They dilute it, then add something to it — I can’t really tell you the exact formula — but the fact is, the price of it is astronomical, literally. Because it can only be procured from the local spiders.”

“I see. A bit like crude oil from dinosaurs.”

Arts gave me a long look which told me that she’d just lost the very last bit of respect for my humble self. Still, she continued,

“Actually, I understand now why the mercs built such an expensive camp here with so many overheads. They work as middle men for the Central Worlds’ energy corporations. All others are obliged to dispatch combat groups here, armed with magic and silent weapons. But even these

risk attracting attention. And as you well understand, not all of them come back home alive."

"I see. So this was one such group that must have come across a spider. They barely managed to wound him — but he made mincemeat of them. So what's that got to do with us?"

"Dammit, Serge, this is really obvious! We're standing next to a whole heap of really expensive resource which we can easily sell. And what's more, it's even more expensive than dust here. Besides, we could use it ourselves, you never know. It would have been one thing if we didn't have anything to put it in. But we do! Look at this! There're more Jerry cans here than we can ever use."

"We don't have the time."

"We won't be long. We'll just fill a couple."

I picked up a can. It was light. I'd say it was metal but it had a very strange sheen to it. It must have had some spell cast on it.

Very well. It might be worth it, after all, you never know.

I put four empty cans into my inventory — I could have stuffed them all in there if I wanted to — and urged Arts to get her act together.

After a few precious seconds, we were back by the spider's body. The big question was, how were we supposed to extract the said liquid?

Luckily, we had Arts at hand who unceremoniously demanded I give her my Moon Steel dagger.

She climbed one of the spider's legs onto his body. Decapitated, he looked truly bizarre in the weak light cast by both my hand and Arts' staff. He was a fascinating sight, like the columns of a sunken city discovered by a group of divers.

Arts, however, didn’t seem to have any qualms about desecrating the body. She pierced the spider’s chitinous body like a wine barrel, then widened the hole as the aetylene began dripping from it. It had a revolting smell reminiscent of stale moonshine.

“Whatcha starin at?” Arts shouted, throwing caution to the wind. “Come on, fill it up!”

I gingerly opened a can, trying to avoid the dark substance getting on my hands, and started filling it under the thin trickle of liquid. By then, Arts had already come down to me, using her staff to illuminate the way.

It suddenly occurred to me that we looked like two idiot drivers at a gas station using a lighter to see how much gas they got left in the tank. Arts hurried to reassure me, explaining that aetylene didn’t burn, at least not in its natural form.

After we’d filled up five cans and started to fill another one, my chest clenched with an unpleasant premonition.

A cold shiver ran down my spine. We had to go.

“Let’s beat it,” I said, stuffing the cans into my inventory.

“Serge, we only have very little left,” Arts protested.

“Let’s go!” I growled.

She obediently slammed the half-empty container shut.

Now we abandoned most of our earlier precautions. I ran with one outstretched hand, illuminating the way ahead. Arts even launched a couple of fireballs so we could see further up the road. Which was very fortunate because the trail kept threading its way in and out of rocky outcrops. Had it not been for Arts, we could have missed it.

I seemed to hear all sorts of things behind me: rocks tumbling down a slope, a threatening screeching of mandibles and the bloodthirsty chattering of spiders' voices. As hard as I wanted it to be my imagination playing games on me, my Intuition unfortunately told me otherwise.

Your Indefatigability skill has increased to level 8.

We were already within sight of the Gatehouse. Dimly lit by wall lamps, its interior glowed weakly in the darkness. Its never-closing doors invited us with the promise of long-awaited safety.

That's when I felt a pang of something bad about to happen. I let Arts past me, drew the railgun and turned round.

Almost, that is.

Your Unarmored Combat skill has increased to level 14.

I was knocked off my feet, crumpled like a cuddly toy. I somersaulted rather clumsily, hitting my back on a sharp rock — but at least I was back on my feet just in time to face my attacking opponent.

I couldn't see jack, so I was obliged to rely on my hearing which told me that something was closing in on me, swiftly and unavoidably.

My finger gently squeezed the trigger, instantly dispelling the vile unwelcoming darkness. For some reason, I got the impression that the light moved in leaps and bounds, illuminating first the gun nozzle, then the monster that was stalking me, and then, having eviscerated him, it shone further on, revealing the dying spider's friends.

There was a whole shedload of them. At least a couple of dozen hairy-nostrilled monsters eager to rip us apart, totally unsuspecting that they would only have a heap of dust for their trouble. Or maybe they got their kicks from tasting the blood of their wounded victims. I couldn't really tell.

In fact, they were much smaller than the first spider we'd killed earlier. A few were the same height as myself — probably some youngsters taking their first hunting lessons from their elders.

Still, my lucky shot seemed to have confused them somewhat, forcing them to stop and consider their own mortality. Stupid as they were, they did seem to understand that the stick in their two-legged opponent's hands was quite capable of blowing their brains out.

Which was exactly what I needed.

I jumped back to my feet, stuck the cumbersome railgun back in my inventory and made a last dash toward the Gatehouse.

Arts was already waiting for me by the entrance, apparently reluctant to go inside. She even took a step back toward me, so worried she was about me.

And it looked like her anxiety was well-founded. I barged in, literally taking her with me.

I swung round just as a spider's head loomed out of the weak light as if in slow mo. It was covered with countless black eyes.

Then I watched it crumple in a jet of fire, shriveling as it disappeared from view.

No, it wasn't Arts discovering her dormant Pyromaniac abilities. It was us achieving exactly what we'd hoped to achieve, finding ourselves under the Gatekeeper's protection. He was now dousing the monsters with flames, preventing them from coming inside.

So! I'd always thought that Gatekeepers were dumb swashbucklers who could only wield their swords and little else. But apparently, they weren't averse to casting an occasional spell or two, either.

It took him less than a minute to explain to the spiders the error of their ways. In the end, they agreed with his reasoning, allowing him to go back to his pedestal while the surviving monsters ran off back to their cursed, eternally black world.

Arts and I crouched by the wall, gasping. I could feel the warmth of her body; I saw her chest rise and fall, unable to shake off the feeling that we'd very nearly had it. And not for the first time, either.

On impulse, I asked,

"What if it's all for nothing?"

"What are you talking about?" she asked, uncomprehending.

"What if there's no plan regarding me? What if I don't have any superior purpose? What if all these sacrifices, deaths, all the destruction is for nothing? What if there's nothing for me to look forward to at the end of my life's journey?"

"If you just sit here moaning, you'll never find out. How many, do you think, get disappointed at the end of their life's journey? Very few. Simply because most of them fall by the wayside. So come on, get up, it's not the right moment to get soft on yourself. It's quite possible that some of the mercs are alive and on their way here. In which case, I'd rather we weren't around by the time they get here."

She had a point as usual. Groaning like an old man, I climbed back to my feet. My back was in agony from the spider's punch. It wouldn't be bad if I came away from it with just a bruise. I really didn't look forward to visiting a healer.

"We're going first to Ooont, then to Meyer via Calon. Meyer is the world where they dress like old hippies."

I nodded. "I remember. I don't think I'm gonna like it there."

“Don’t worry, we’re not gonna hang around there. We’re virtually only a stone’s throw away from Anchor World. In which case you’d better...” she gave me a wink, casting a meaningful glance at the Gatekeeper’s bowl.

Of course. I was the one with the purse strings.

The dust slid down the bowl’s sides. Before it could reach the bottom, the combined effects of my voice and the Gatekeeper’s magic abilities lifted it swirling into the air.

It grew considerably lighter. I heard the roar of the tide, followed by a water snake’s signature call:

“Ooont!”

I walked over to the door, not yet prepared to come out, and gave myself a quick once-over. I was covered in dirt and dust, my tattered clothes smeared with spiders’ entrails. Arts didn’t look any better.

“I don’t think we can just show up in the Central Worlds looking like this,” she said. “This isn’t how you meet serious customers. We need to change into something else, get scrubbed up and clean up our clothes.”

A quarter of an hour later we teleported to Calon. Quite honestly, as worlds go, I couldn’t figure this one out. Admittedly, a little town nearby reminded me strongly of Earth, with the exception of the towering skyscrapers and the streetcars creeping across the sky.

“What a hole,” Arts said dismissively as she peeked out of the door with me.

Okay. In which case, I’d love to see what passes for a capital in this world.

The world of Meyer turned out to be much more dynamic, jumpy even, like an OD'ing glam rock star. It was bright and loud, its sky crowded with airmobiles, its streets busy with people in colorful clothes and with audacious hair styles. All taken together, it was a futuristic take on the 1970 disco craze replete with all the glitter and gunk, as if they couldn't peel it off and just leave it behind.

Luckily, we didn't have to spend much time here at all, and we didn't even have to leave the Gatehouse. This was the advantage of long-distance world traveling: you didn't have to wait long. I was already preparing to face the next world whose name was U2, strangely enough (I just hoped that this name hadn't served as an inspiration for a certain band I knew) when something very strange happened.

The dust didn't rise from the bowl.

Mind you, there's a moment in the life of every man when something doesn't rise. But in this particular case, I just couldn't figure it out.

I added some more money just in case, thinking that I might have misheard the exact fare. Then I took Arts by the hand again and announced our destination.

Nothing.

"What am I doing wrong?" I asked Arts.

She looked at me, just as surprised. Which could only mean one thing: she had no idea what was up, either.

The answer came from an unexpected quarter. Which was located about couple of feet above yours truly.

The Gatekeeper sprang to life like a Chinese figurine and said what sounded like a prerecorded phrase:

“Upon special decree, all travel to the core of Central Worlds is only permitted with special dispensation from the rulers of intermediate Central Worlds.”

“Pardon me?” Arts said.

“When you have a permission, you can travel further,” he clarified.

“I think,” I said, “that we just might have to take a look at this Meyer place.”

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Chapter 16

TRAVELING IS A GREAT THING — not even so much as to see new places but to reset your own worldview. To expand your own horizons, embrace new mindsets and, quite possibly, to rethink your own life journey — comparison being your most important tool, as you're obliged to put into prospective everything you have known and seen before.

It's a bit like the Decembrist uprising which shattered Tsarist Russia in the early 19th century. By the end of the Napoleonic wars, the future Decembrists were the finest among the Russian nobility: highly educated young men who entered a defeated Paris at the head of the Russian troops. There, they witnessed all the progress achieved by the European illuminati — and they realized that their fellow countrymen deserved a better life too. So they stood up against the Tsar in December 1825 — and they paid the price, their leaders hanged, the rest of them sentenced to hard labor in Siberian ore mines. But their selfless feat did put it into prospective for their compatriots.

Or take Mahatma Ghandhi, who left the warm shores of India for a cold and foggy London in search of education. And once he was back, he got busy liberating his country from the British rule. Because he saw things in prospective and envisioned a new future for his fellow countrymen.

Even Bilbo Baggins, of all people, was deeply transformed by his journey there and back again. It was this transformation which turned the ordinary hobbit into one of the greatest Player writers of all times, one who shared his amazing adventures with us humble commoners.

In this respect, Players had it much easier overall. They had not just countries but entire worlds at their fingertips, some of them as identical as twins, others as different as apples and pears. And while I'd already seen my fair share of fringe worlds, these Central ones were a novelty to me.

Meyer may have only been an intermediate Central world — as both the Gatekeeper and Arts had hurried to attest — but it admittedly left me open-mouthed. Their Community, which was supposed to be a safe haven for local Players, seethed with activity like strawberry jam boiling away on a stove.

We found it straight away. I gawked at all the Players darting across the sky in what I could best describe as flying motorbikes speeding through the air at different altitudes. Funnily enough, it reminded me of the chaotic road traffic in some Asian countries where everyone moved in whichever direction they wanted. Still, during the whole time that I'd been watching them, I'd noticed no collisions or accidents. How did they do that?

Their houses surprised me even more. Identical concrete boxes, gray and drab, they were hung with colorful signs, making me think of homely girls in fancy hats.

Their language was strange. It seemed to be a complex fusion of several human languages — but still I somehow managed to understand it. Who would have thought...

"How is it possible that so many humans ended up so far from Cesspit?" I asked Arts.

"What makes you think they're human?" she replied.

"Oh, well..." I stumbled, completely at a loss.

Just at that moment, a local Player shot past on one of those flying motorbikes. He was clad in a biker jacket and Hawaii shorts, his pink Mohawk elaborately brushed to one side, his eyes concealed by a pair of

round sunglasses. Okay, maybe they weren't completely human, after all. At least not exactly normal.

"So are they human or aren't they?" I repeated.

"Well, the difference between humans and Meyerians is like the difference between a regular spud and a sweet potato. Similar anatomies and reproductive functions, but that's where the similarities end. We're two different species, if you know what I mean."

"You mean we can't cross-breed?"

"What part of 'different species' don't you understand? Anyway, I suggest we discuss it later. We're too conspicuous."

Arts was dead right there. Despite all the motley variety of races surrounding us, from Purgs to Iorolfs, we still seemed to be collecting quite a few suspicious stares.

We hurried to cross the main square — so large that it easily housed all of the Community's main buildings — and reached the Syndicate's entrance.

Just then, a local dude clad in a loud red and green jumpsuit tumbled out of the doors, rather inebriated. He gave Arts a long look and opened his filthy mouth,

"I think I've seen you here before, hooman female. Would you like to see my den? It's right over here."

"Would you like to see your guts spilling first?" I said, reaching for the railgun. "Let's see how much dust they can make!"

I must have been quite proficient in Meyerish already because he seemed to have understood me just fine, even despite the considerable level

of alcohol in his blood. He raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture and started to retreat without turning his back on us.

“Just please keep it cool while we’re inside,” Arts said. “Best of all, just keep your mouth shut. I’m gonna find someone who might rent us a room. We’ll drop our stuff off there, clean ourselves up, and then we’ll think what to do next.”

I nodded lightly as I returned the railgun to my inventory, then followed her into the Syndicate.

The place was consumed by the same manic frenzy as the rest of this world. The tables here weren’t large and comfortable as in our own Syndicate back in Cesspit. They were high, forcing Players to remain standing. Waitresses threaded their way around them, swift in their magnetic rollerblades. Then again, I wasn’t an expert: all I could see was that their blades soared weightlessly in the air, allowing the servers to get from A to B rather fast. A bit too fast for my liking, if you ask me.

Basically, I felt like a village dude who’s just arrived in a big city for the first time and just can’t keep up with the local rhythm of life. The type that stands bolt upright in the middle of a subway platform gawking at everything.

Everybody seemed to be in such a hurry. They were served colorful drinks in tiny shot glasses which they downed jerkily instead of unhurriedly nursing them. Their conversations resembled the chatter of a machine gun where everybody tried to pour as much information out in as short a time as possible.

Besides, no one looked at each other. They stared into their inventories, their phone screens, their wrist gadgets — anything but not into their friends’ eyes.

We took the table furthest from the entrance. Not that it guaranteed quiet company. Right next to us stood a hoodlum with a rainbow hairdo,

arguing at the top of his voice. Behind us, a dogman and an Abbas were trying to drink each other under the table — and judging by all the empty glasses in front of them, they'd been doing it for quite a while. Another nearby group of locals left, only to be replaced by more rowdy Players.

Arts activated an interactive holographic menu in front of her and ordered something. "Just to blend in," she explained.

While she was inspecting the room looking for any potential landlords, I started studying some round knobs on the table in front of me. Aha, so the one highlighted red was apparently our order.

What? Twenty grams of dust for four drinks?

I suppressed a growing indignation and continued poking the knobs. One was a map of the city which looked more like an elaborate maze — apparently for any visitors. Interestingly, it instantly got uploaded to my own interface. Thanks a bunch.

What else? Ah, missions! Much better than that stupid message board of ours hung with yellowed scraps of paper.

Industrial Espionage
Mission from iTex Corporation
More details upon meeting
Reward: 2 kg
A bonus will be awarded upon the mission's successful completion.

IR7-compatible pistons
Mission from the Order of Technocrats
3 pistons required
Location: Free Port markets
Reward: 900 g

M16 Destructor Robot
Mission from the Order of Guards

Charged with: malfunctioning
Sentence: deactivation
Proof of completion: control chart
Location: Gaash, industrial sector, floor 76
Reward: 600 g

Just as I was thinking that it was hardly a fair reward for dispatching no less than a robot, the mission disappeared. Someone must have already completed it. But even without it, there were tons of tasks here to suit every level of difficulty, every taste and every wallet.

I felt a pang of jealousy for the first time since I'd been in the Game. You had to give the Central Worlds their due.

I was about to close the window when one last mission caught my eye:

Avenge Your Brothers!
Mission from the Order of Libertarians

Description: Human, female. Cropped chestnut hair. Slim build. May be accompanied by a male human/Korl halfblood.

Charged with: killing members of the Libertarian fraternity; destroying the Stronghold merc camp.

Sentence: to be delivered to the Head of the Order
Location: the Central Worlds
Reward: 4 kg

I felt something snap inside me. Of course I knew straight away who that "human female" was. And the most disgusting thing was, her description was total BS. I mean, how many women with cropped hair could there be in all of the Central Worlds? Probably loads. But it very inopportunely mentioned me, which was much worse. With my Korl build and my blond hair, I was pretty hard to miss.

As I looked up, my gaze met with that of a local guy wearing a colorful synthetic jacket. He was literally scanning me with his eyes, not even trying to turn away.

My chest groaned with a bad premonition. How I wished it was just a coincidence.

“I also heard that some Cesspit bitch trashed the mercs’ camp in Hist,” a voice came from the neighboring table. It was the dogman speaking to his friend the Abbas, both already slightly worse for wear.

“Trust me, buddy, this was an Aides’ job,” the dogman continued. “They’ve always had an ax to grind with the Libs over their turf. So they paid them back in kind. You can bet your bottom dollar there’ll be big changes in demography here. Whoever deals the first blow will probably end up winning.”

Aha. So that’s why, instead of just killing Arts, they wanted her to be delivered to the head of the Order. He must be thinking it’s all part of the Aides’ sabotage. Not that it made it any easier for us. Talking about being caught between a rock and a hard place!

One thing was clear: we definitely couldn’t linger here for much longer.

“Come on, let’s go,” I said, pulling Arts by the hand.

“Why, what’s up with you?”

“I’ll tell you outside. Quick!”

On our way out, we stumbled into our rollerblade waitress delivering our order and were obliged to shell out twenty grams for the drinks we weren’t going to drink. As we reached the entrance, I turned round and saw the same guy, his gaze still firmly fixed on us.

A lump formed in my throat. So it hadn’t been my imagination.

“Can you tell me what’s going on?” Arts demanded, setting her hands on her hips.

“They’re looking for us, that’s what’s going on. Follow me.”

The vital thing when issuing orders is to put on a really important face, like you mean it. Now, too, Arts obediently followed me even though I didn’t even completely understand yet where we were supposed to go. Don’t get me wrong: we did have a map, courtesy of the local Syndicate. But what was I supposed to do with it if I had never been to either this city or this world previously?

I took a couple of turns, only to walk right into a Player in a loud red and green jumpsuit.

Wait up, I’ve seen this guy before! His inebriated stare sized me up just as he was about to flake out right there, in the middle of this dark alley. Still, my good nature and my firm prosthetic arm stopped him as an idea began to form in my head.

“You’re well and truly wasted, aren’t you, buddy? Would you like me to drop you off at home?”

“I’d really appreciate it, *hooman*. If you manage to take me home, I’ll lay you onto a couple grams of dust.”

He said it rather cheekily while still hanging on to my prosthetic arm. Still, he conjured up a brown crystal and handed it over to me.

With bated breath, I absorbed it, then looked at its mark on the map. It wasn’t very far although it was still outside the Community limits. Bingo.

I helped the local drunk to his feet and steered him home without much trouble. If you disregarded the earlier scenes, you could easily imagine yourself being in one of the rundown highrise suburbs of one of Cesspit's major cities. Street after street of tower blocks; tiny windows; short back lanes crossing each other and occasionally broadening out into large noisy highways. Interestingly, they had plenty of overland traffic too, mainly heavy trucks. Then again, somehow I didn't think they used gas here.

I peered up into the sky which was alive with the to-ing and fro-ing of "airbikes". Don't they get tired of their own world here?

"Hey, hooman, I live over there."

So! He was still capable of finding his own bearings!

We reached one of the doorless gateways and walked up to the third floor. The building was huge: two wings divided by an elevator in the middle. The long straight corridor was lined with identical doors which only differed by their numbers. You didn't need to be drunk to feel queasy from all this monotony.

Still, our new friend handled it well. He even reached out confidently for one of the doors, even though I'd already checked the map out and knew exactly where to go.

"Thanks, hooman," the guy said, swiping the door handle with a little disk-shaped thing. "Normally, I'm not a bit fan of you guys, but you seem to be quite cool."

I didn't fancy listening to the end of his diatribe. So as soon as the door opened, I gave him a light nudge which sent him sprawling onto the floor. Than done, Arts and I walked in too.

The apartment — if you could call it so — wasn't in the best of shape. Never large in the first place, it was now littered with crumpled

paper plates, empty bottles and all sorts of trash which now rendered it so tiny you couldn’t even swing a cat.

“Hooman...” our new friend groaned from the floor.

I started to look around for something to tie him up with. But as luck would have it, I couldn’t find anything. Not even a toaster lead. In the end, I was obliged to remove his jumpsuit and handed it over to Arts as the apartment’s owner groaned his protest.

Without a word being said, Arts understood and tied his hands behind his back. I walked over to the control panel and poked a few buttons. The lights came on; with a hiss from above, a narrow single bed began to slide out of the wall but froze halfway, jammed by all the trash.

“Now Arts, just sit down and listen.”

Arts met the news of her “Wanted” status in this world with a frowned brow and a four-letter expletive. But what was I supposed to say? The unfortunate shootout in the camp had been her idea to begin with. On the other hand, had it been me who’d shot the wretched gun, they would have been looking for me now, so it was all pretty academic.

The only bad news was that Arts was the one who knew this world. Maybe not as an expert but still. And me, I was a total virgin. But according to her plan, it was me who was supposed to work it all out somehow. Or so she thought.

And to begin with, I needed to find out everything I could about the local ruler.

As it turned out, I also must have been quite an expert at hacking control panels. No idea why: whether it was my Mechanic skill or my natural affinity with gadgets, but I promptly located a control for a wall shower and something that resembled a washing machine. The only

difference being, it required no water, the cleaning all being done by vacuum.

In less than fifteen minutes, I was already standing by the door, spanking clean and wearing freshly ironed togs.

“Just knock like this,” the girl tapped out a rhythm, “and I’ll open up.”

“You’d better give me his key disk,” I said.

Talking about whom, the apartment’s owner was now happily snoring away on the floor, apparently having come to grips with his current fate. Wish I had some of his oblivious stoicism in the face of adversity.

“Won’t work,” Arts said. “It’s a biometric key.”

“Shit. Never mind. I won’t be long.”

I hurried to get out of the building which felt almost infinite with its drab unending corridors. The only bonus point was, there weren’t many people around even despite its humongous size. Maybe they were all at work?

I took every possible precaution as I returned to the Community. I had no intention of going back to the Syndicate. Somehow I doubted that the kind of person I was looking for would hang around there, rubbing shoulders with all that crowd.

There were two other bars marked on the map where I could potentially find him. I walked out into the square and sized up their premises. One was located in a four-story edifice, the other in what looked like a warehouse. I went for the latter — and I was right.

The bar seemed to have known better days. But at least it looked like a proper watering hole. None of that drink-on-the-go nonsense, just a good

old-school place where you could lounge about without staring at all those holographic screens popping up on the tables.

Its patrons gave it an added charm, most of them middle-aged, their clothes plain and calm. I watched them for a while until I decided on the right candidate. But first I headed for the bartender who was minding the weathered bar scratched by years of numerous keys and knives.

“Are you having a glorious day, *hooman*? What’s your poison?”

As I stared at the small wiry bartender, I suddenly realized that this “hooman” thing wasn’t meant to insult me. I shouldn’t have taken offense earlier on. The guy whose apartment we’d hijacked hadn’t meant to insult us.

“Gimme a couple of what that elderly gentleman is having,” I replied.

He nodded. After half a minute, he set two mugs on the bar, filled with thick dark liquid. Judging by the smell, it was something hovering between ale and beer. I really had no desire to sample it — but at least it only cost 12 grams.

“Excuse me, Sir,” I said, walking over to my selected ‘victim’. “May I join you?”

He raised a surprised eyebrow. If the truth were known, there were plenty of vacant stools around. The bar was quite spacious and customers few and far between. But once I’d offered him one of the mugs, he waved a gracious hand at the stool next to him and even tried to strike up a conversation.

“Is this your first time here?”

“Yep. Wanted to check out the Central Worlds. But apparently, these days you need a special dispensation,” I replied.

“Damn those new rules!” the old man cussed, downing half the mug. Although he still spoke faster than myself, at least he wasn’t chattering away like his younger compatriots.

I pushed my own mug toward him and asked cautiously,

“Why, is it so difficult to get?”

“Had it been easy, I’d have already been employed by one of the U2 shipyards. But I’ve been stuck here for over a week already. Their ruler wants twenty kilos of dust for this dispensation thing! Doesn’t matter whether you’re a group or a solo traveler. He doesn’t care, does he? Who can possibly pay that kind of money for a pass?”

Oh. I only had just over nine kilos on me. Plus the aetylene — but first I needed to sell it. Should I offer it to their ruler, maybe? I could try, I suppose. Then again, maybe not? No idea. I needed to discuss it with Arts, anyway.

“On the other hand, it has its advantages,” the old man continued, pushing the empty mug away. I was worried he might drink himself senseless before we were done but he seemed to take his drink well. “It also means those wretched Libertarians can’t get here, either.”

“Pardon me?”

“Their main residence is three planets up from Anchor World. And from what I hear, rules are much tougher there. Our Orders may have our local ruler eating out of their hands — but it’s not like that over there, oh no. From what I heard, he can’t be bought at all. So I’m obliged to wait until the rules are eased. Because as soon as Libs manage to get here, they’ll end up in a nice big scuffle.”

“Why?”

The old man shook his head in dismay. “You don’t seem to understand our local politics, do you? Listen up. There’re four Orders of Mercenaries here in the Central Worlds. The Libertarians, the Free Lancers, the Renegades and the Aides. The Free Lancers are the biggest — but they mainly operate on the other side of Anchor. Here it’s mainly the Libs who run the coop. And the Aides, but not that much. They’ve been hassled a lot just lately. So what did they do? They destroyed the Stronghold which is the Libs’ main camp in Hist. Which almost wiped the latter off the map. So it’s coming to war.”

“How do you know all this?”

“People talk. They say, there’s this girl working for the Aides now. A real spitfire. They say she pulled off the whole thing single-handedly. So now she’s got a contract out on her. All the Libs in Meyer are looking for her now.”

What he’d just told me set my alarm bells ringing. The fact that Arts was now supposed to be the Aides’ mysterious new infiltrator was quite flattering, especially considering that the Aides had never even heard about her. But the fact that she had a contract out on her wasn’t the best of news.

I chatted with the old man for a while, just to keep up appearances, and even found out the locations of the merc Orders’ in the city. After five more minutes, I bid my farewells and hurried to the exit. The news was gnawing at me, so I couldn’t wait to share it with Arts.

What a predicament! Maybe it would be better to go back home and wait until the dust settled down. Why not? I could go back to the Guards, surrender my weapons and let them lock me up. Let them send a shrink to me; I just might be able to defeat the Darkest One ruling my soul. At least that way we wouldn’t be so easy to find... or would we? The mercs knew that Arts was a *hooman*... or, dammit, I picked that up too easily... that she was from Cesspit, that is. And I wouldn’t put it past them to send a few goons to look her up, considering that the price tag on her head was already

4 kilos — and it had only been a few hours since they'd put out an APB on her.

I tried hard not to run on my way back. But once I dove into the gateway, I didn't have to restrain myself any longer. I flew up to the third floor, taking the steps three at a time.

I'd marked the right door on the map before leaving, to make sure I could find it straight away. Which made sense: all the doors looked identical here. But it hadn't been necessary: I found our apartment straight away, anyway — simply because it had no door at all anymore. Just a broken piece of plastic, mangled out of shape and forced off its hinges.

And a tiny handful of dust, already half-dissolved, lying in the middle of the room.

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Chapter 17

IF ORIENTAL ENLIGHTENING PRACTICES are to be believed, meditation is the best way to repel all black emotions in moments of spiritual uneasiness. Failing to do that might forever blight your passage to Nirvana.

Unfortunately, right now I was still a long way off being enlightened enough to drop into a Lotus position, shut my eyes and try to think about something positive.

All I wanted right now was to smash the place to smithereens. Never had I fallen into such a rage before, not even when I'd been burdened by the Darkest One's presence.

I groaned darkly as I mindlessly crumpled the remnants of the door, grinding my teeth. So stupid of me! I'd thought we'd shaken them off! But apparently, that dude from the Syndicate had been on our tail all along.

It took me a few minutes to muster my emotions and stop expressing them in f-words. Then I began to study the crime scene.

First of all, the dust scattered on the floor didn't contain any of Arts' stuff. Only some strange thingies: cards and monkey wrenches, as well as something that looked like small batteries. Or whatever. The ugly red and green jumpsuit was lying on the floor nearby.

Next. The only trace of Arts' presence was a wet towel lying next to the shower. Which meant she was probably alive.

But of course she was! They needed to bring her in for questioning, didn’t they? Which meant she was obliged to be alive and in one piece somewhere.

I furiously slammed my fist on the floor just from the thought of it. I had to rescue her ASAP.

I checked our hapless host’s remains. No money, no weapons — whoever had killed him had stripped him of everything of any value. Then I rushed out into the corridor, desperately trying to work out what to do next.

The Order of the Libertarians was located a bit too far away to just walk there. Judging by the map, this city was in fact a conglomeration of several smaller ones. I could see clusters of buildings interspersed with busy junctions. I would have to find some means of transportation first, and then...

I froze in my tracks. And then what? The only Avatar ability I still had available was Justice. Plus my railgun with the remaining two charges. And what next? How many enemies would I have to confront? What was their Order’s residence like? What were their security measures?

I collapsed onto the steps, realizing I was deep in it. I absolutely had to rescue Arts, no doubt about it. The thought of leaving her in trouble and continuing to Anchor World on my own didn’t even cross my mind.

The big question was, how would I do it? Walking into the Libertarians’ den on my own was nothing short of committing suicide.

The map was covered in a multitude of appellations. One of them seemed familiar: *the Aides*.

An invisible switch seemed to go off in my head, sending all the pieces of this jigsaw puzzle to their rightful places. What was it the old man had said? ‘*Whoever deals the first blow will probably end up winning.’*

So should I maybe mix business with pleasure?

I resolutely climbed back to my feet. The Aides' residence was located toward the other side of the Syndicate. It wasn't very far: a brisk walk of about fifteen minutes.

In fact, it turned out to be closer to thirty. Despite having a map at my disposal, I must have inherited my Mom's lack of spatial awareness. Plus the fact that time was playing into our enemies' hands made me nervous enough to make too many mistakes.

When I finally saw the building I was looking for, I had to double-check the map because it didn't look at all like the residency of a respected Order. But no, I wasn't mistaken. A few idle Players loitering about the shabby tower block confirmed my worst suspicions. Admittedly, this wasn't how I'd imagined it to be.

To begin with, the building must have stood abandoned for a long time, judging by all the broken windows festooned with tattered curtains and bits of broken blinds. Besides, there must have been a fire on the top floors at some point, which had colored the building's façade with soot, making it look like a tearful girl's face streaked with mascara.

And finally, I couldn't see a single light in any of the windows. Which was no surprise, because the building must have been off the grid for quite a while. Still, there were no other potential candidates on the map, so I headed for it, aiming for a small group of Players next to it.

The reason I'd chosen it was probably because four out of the five group members appeared to be human. Or so I thought, not realizing that the only way I could really tell a Meyerian was by their supposedly garish clothes.

But by then, it was already too late. One of the girls in the group had already noticed me. Her development brunch was a ***Baedeker.*** All the others continued to argue, completely ignoring me.

“We’ve got to get the hell out of here,” said a ***Suggestic***, a small guy with short cropped hair. “The Aides are finished. We’d better cross to the other side of Anchor before it’s too late. We’ll lie low for a while before joining some of the mercs.”

“That’s not very nice, is it?” an ***Axel*** objected, flipping his dark red hair to one side and casting a look at a tall girl next to him, whose name tag identified her as a ***Mirror***. The girl didn’t seem to notice his gaze, too busy fingering a deep furrow across her forehead.

“It’s not a question of being nice,” a ***Bifurcator*** said snidely. He was a catman with long whiskers and a gorgeous gray coat. “In order to cross to the other side of Anchor, we need to pay off the ruler first. We barely have half of what he normally charges — and how do you want us to live once we get there?”

“Wait up, guys,” Baedeker piped up.

“Not now,” Suggestic said, waving her away. He must have been the brains of the little group, even if not their leader. “Well, in that case we need to raise some money.”

“Guys, please!”

Finally they noticed me. Even the Mirror girl who’d been busy staring at the ground at her feet all this time finally looked up at me.

“Hi guys,” I said. “Do I understand right that this is the Aides’ residence?”

“No, it’s flippin’ Buckingham Palace,” Baedeker replied good-naturedly with a wide grin. “How can we help you?” she fell silent, looking at her friends who continued to study me without saying a word.

“I need to have a word with your leader,” I said. “It’s quite important. It’s about the Libs.”

The catman and the Baedeker girl turned quizzically to Suggestic.

He didn’t play hard to get. Without taking his eyes off me as if he could glean more about me with every passing second, he unhurriedly raised a hand and pointed at the tower block. “Go on up and ask for Ruffler. That’s our leader’s name. Tell the guards you have some intel on the Libs, and they’ll flag you through.”

“Thanks,” I said with a friendly smile.

Baedeker was the only person who returned my courtesy.

Interestingly, the whole group followed in my wake. I literally could feel the trap closing shut behind me.

Still, I had nowhere to run — and I couldn’t, anyway. I had to rescue Arts at any cost. And if it took striking a deal with the devil, so be it.

Suggestic hadn’t let me down. As soon as I’d uttered the magic word “Libertarians” to the guards posted by the front door, they let me in.

The building’s interior was marginally better than its façade. The place looked lived-in. It was furnished with worn-out couches, rickety tables, old cupboards and all sorts of old furniture. A few rooms served as storage. The Players themselves only occupied the first floor. I even noticed a few bars blocking the stairwells. Was it to make sure no one could get in?

Their leader’s development branch was apparently ***Ruffler***. He was sitting in one of the rooms tugging on his cigarette. In both his looks and his manners he was a spitting image of a drug baron, not the leader of a major Order. One of the guards walked over to him, whispering in his ear while pointing at me.

In the meantime, the building's entrance was already crowded with Players, including the group that had brought me here. Discipline? What discipline?

Ruffler's gaze tried to focus on me — but still his pupils remained dilated a bit more than necessary. "Who are you?"

"My name's Serge," I said. "I have a proposition for you."

"I'm all ears," Ruffler said mockingly. Judging by all the giggling behind my back, he wasn't in a very businesslike mood.

"I propose we attack the Libs' residence," I said.

"I just love it," Ruffler replied. "Great idea! I'm all for that. Did you hear that, guys? Get your shit together. We're gonna attack the Libs!"

A new round of guffawing broke out behind my back.

"I'm gonna pay you," I said. "I have some dust."

"How much?" Ruffler asked, tipping his head to one side.

"Nine kilos," I said, feeling the sweat running down my back.

Now they just exploded into mirth. Still, I pretended not to notice what was going on behind me. Seeing Ruffler's grinning chops was more than enough.

"That's a lot of money," he said. "But from what I heard, dead people have no use for it."

"I have something else, too."

I reached into my inventory for a can of aetylene. My first impulse was to give him the one that was full to the brim — but, guided by my

Intuition, I chose instead the one that wasn't completely full. I pulled it out and set it before him.

Ruffler's greasy eyes glistened. He expertly unscrewed the top, sniffed the putrid substance and nodded his satisfaction. "Excellent. But that's not the problem. How can I be sure it wasn't the Libs who sent you here? How do I know this isn't all a trap? Otherwise, how would a lowly Cesspit *hooman* have such a treasure in his possession?"

"It was my girlfriend and I who destroyed the Libs' camp in Hist," I said.

"I believe you," he agreed with suspicious ease. "I even have a funny feeling that the Libs have your girlfriend. That's why you're here. In which case, what prevents me from selling you to them as well? That way I could kill two birds with one stone: divert their suspicion from us and get a bit of money for my trouble."

The Players behind my back started whispering indignantly between themselves.

In a way, it was a good thing they were here. Their presence served as a litmus test of sorts, revealing the color of the public sentiment in their Order. They definitely weren't happy with Ruffler's suggestion — which considerably limited the possibility of their covert collaboration with the Libs, too.

"You know very well the Libs won't believe you," I said.

"Sure," Ruffler said with a smirk. "I also know that your business proposition, as you call it, is absolute and utter bullshit. It's suicide. You have to be really stupid and desperate to try to pull that off. And we're neither. Thanks for brightening up our day and especially for parting with such a valuable resource. I didn't expect such a high return for my, er, consulting services."

Still grinning, he pocketed the can, transferring it into his inventory. The guards picked me up, ready to drag me out.

[∞]

“...I didn’t expect such a high return for my, er, consulting services.”

I swiftly pocketed the can myself, moving it back into my own inventory.

Ruffler was lost for words. He raised a commanding hand — which was something I’d already expected.

I ducked, dodging the guards’ attack, kicking one out of my way and pistol-whipping another with my railgun.

Your Hand-to-Hand Fighting skill has increased to level 14.

That wasn’t a very clever thing to do, I belatedly realized, as the weapon wasn’t meant to be used in that manner. Still, it was already too late — and the railgun had passed the crash test with flying colors.

“No need to do anything stupid,” Ruffler said, promptly becoming serious as he stared at the gun in my hands. I even got the impression that he’d sobered up a little from his narcotic haze. “If you shoot, you won’t come out of here alive.”

A circle of bristling guns stared me in the face, confirming his words. Luckily, no one was in a hurry to shoot, apparently curious how it all might pan out.

A surge of unintelligible whispers rose in the crowd, either encouraging someone who was making his way through the crowd or calling for him to arrive. With every passing second, their words grew stronger and clearer.

“Axel!”

“Come on in, Axe!”

“Show him, man!”

The crowd parted, revealing a huge guy with long dark-red hair towering in the doorway.

Wait a sec. I know you! You were one of those standing just outside. Axel, wasn’t it?

“Easy, man,” I warned him. “I normally shoot first and think later.”

Had I had my own coat of arms, I would have had it emblazoned with this motto. Still, Axel ignored my words entirely. Before I could take in a lungful of air, he was already standing next to me. He shouldered me very lightly and took the gun from my hands.

[∞]

No idea how you did it, mister, but you can’t do it again. I watched him stepping out of the crowd, fully prepared for his...

No. This time I didn’t even have the time to dodge. Okay, I tried to step aside but it had no bearing on the outcome of our little altercation. Axel disarmed me, admittedly not in a hurry to finish me off. He turned the railgun in his hands, studying it curiously, then stepped aside.

“You see now?” Ruffler said with a smirk. “No good trying to mess with him. Now open your inventory. Let’s see how much of that aetylene you’ve got.”

“We’re not thieves, Sir,” Axel objected, unexpectedly taking my side. “He had a proposition for you. You rejected it. So that’s the end of it, then.”

“Who do you think you are? This isn’t your turf! I’m the boss here!”

“Wait up, Ruff,” Suggestic butted in, slipping out of the crowd with a conciliatory expression on his face. “You know Axel. He has this thing about treating everyone fairly. But he has a point. What can you make off this amount- thirty kilos on the black market tops, not more. Your Reputational losses would be much higher.”

Admittedly, I didn’t quite get what he was on about. I could hear the words and understand their meanings but his speech was like a mountain stream which surged forward over rapids, whisking me away from reality and carrying me along toward a thunderous waterfall.

I also got the impression that I wasn’t the only one succumbing to his words’ effect. Ruffler, too, was pensively nodding, agreeing with his reasoning, while the crowd outside hung on his every word, soaking in every nuance of his voice.

“...would have been wiser to just let him go. It’s got nothing to do with us. If what he’s saying is true, then the Libs will soon make his girlfriend speak. Then they’ll know we’ve got nothing to do with it. The less fuss we make about it, the better.”

“You’re right,” Ruffler said dazedly, as if he was high on drugs again. “Then what should we do with him?”

“Just kick him out. Let him go to the Renegades and try to talk them into it. We’ll have nothing to do with it, anyway. Axel, would you please help our guest on his way?”

Axel laid his hand on the back of my neck. For the first time in a long while, I felt something shrink within me as if his physical power had somehow communicated to me.

Much to his credit, he didn’t lift me by the scruff of my neck like a naughty kitten — even though I sensed he could. He just steered me toward the door, ushering me out.

I walked down the street, thoroughly humiliated and feeling sorry for myself. Not because I’d dared approach them with that ridiculous “business proposal”, although there was that to it, too. Not even because I’d made a certified fool of myself. The problem was, I’d just lost my railgun which was the only thing I had to offer against the Libs. I could have tried that Axel guy on for size, I suppose — but the only time I’d done so, the score had been 0:2 against me, and I had a funny feeling that every new attempt would only make it worse.

“Axel, you son of a bitch, what do you think you’re doing?” Suggestic hissed as I was heading for the exit, with the best part of their Order trailing after me.

“I know you mean well but would you mind leaving my mother out of your rhetoric?” Axel parried.

“You can’t imagine how I wish I could strangle you with my bare hands,” Suggestic retorted.

“I can. Just be careful what you wish for.”

“Now we really need to lie low for a while,” the catman butted in.

“He’s right,” Mirror agreed. “As soon as Ruffler comes round, he’ll be furious.”

I looked behind me. The entire group was back here now, including Baedeker. We were even standing by the same building.

Suggestic frowned. “Can’t be helped, I suppose. We’ll have to hang around in one of the neighboring cities.”

“I have a better idea,” Baedeker said, frowning. Which she really shouldn’t be doing. No need for all those early worry wrinkles.

“Just spit it out! What are you talking about?”

The girl gave me a meaningful look. I’d have loved to add my two cents to the conversation — but unfortunately, Axel pointed my railgun at me.

I shrunk back, preparing to whip out my Moon Steel dagger, but Axel managed to surprise me again.

“Take it back,” he said.

“Pardon me?” I asked, uncomprehending.

“This is your gun. I didn’t let you use it inside, but I have no intention of taking it from you. It’s your property.”

Baedeker grinned. “Next time when you want to hand a gun to someone, you’d better give it to them handle first. No need to point it like this.”

“I don’t think so,” Axel replied. “See how nervous he is? I don’t want his hand to tremble so close to the trigger. But me, I have no problem with *my* nerves.”

I was too consumed by their conversation and the miraculous (in the true sense of the word) return of my gun to notice the main thing. The other three — Suggestic, the catman and Mirror — were busy arguing over something. Suggestic appeared to be objecting until finally he started to agree with them, casting glances in my direction.

Not good. Time to leg it before the situation went from bad to worse. Come what may. If I was destined to die rescuing a friend, so be it! I could

see there was no help coming from these quarters.

“Hey you, just wait, will ya?” Suggestic shouted, seeing I was about to sneak away unnoticed. “What’s your name?”

“It’s Serge,” I said reluctantly, realizing that my French leave had failed.

“Listen Serge, what if we help you?”

“You help me?”

“That’s right! Don’t you need to rescue that girlfriend of yours? We have a few skills between us that might help you. We wanted to get out of here anyway. How much dust did you say you had?”

“Nine kilos.”

Suggestic and the catman exchanged happy stares.

“And do you have some more aetylene?”

“I do, but not with me,” I said, unwilling to lay all my cards on the table.

“Normal,” Suggestic said with a smirk. “It would be stupid to carry such crazy money on you. Still, how much have you got?”

At this point, I realized we had a deal.

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Chapter 18

YOU CAN SAY WHAT YOU WANT but life works in funny ways. Sometimes you're forced to spend most of your time with people who in the end turn out to be complete strangers. And other times, you meet a complete stranger who then becomes maybe not a bosom buddy but at least a good friend.

And now I couldn't shake off the feeling that now was exactly such a case.

Of course, each one in the group was different — dramatically so. Axel, who turned out to be some kind of local nobility — a prince, no less, to be precise, — appeared to be a paragon of honor and irreproachability. Admittedly, he wasn't very forthcoming whenever I tried to pose a personal question, trying to change the subject. Although he didn't appear to be more than thirty, his speech betrayed an expert Player. I wouldn't be surprised if he turned out to me several hundred years old.

The next in line was Baedeker. Her eyes were literally beaming with the joy of life, and she was never stuck for words. I still hadn't worked out what her development branch was supposed to mean — but Suggestic had assured me that I'd soon see.

She was also from Earth — from Zaporizhzhia in Ukraine, to be precise. She even seemed to be the same age as myself.

As for Suggestic himself, he seemed to be someone who kept his cards close to his chest. I wouldn't call him exactly cunning, but he always took care of his own interests first (and, as I later found out, those of his

little group as well), and only then thought about others. He was no prince in this respect. According to Baedeker, he was also quite conceited. Surprisingly for me, he too turned out to be my compatriot.

Predictably, the catman was from Ullum: the world where beastmen languished in exile. Despite my negative preconception toward all beastmen and especially of the feline kind, this one seemed like a good guy. And still, I had an inkling of suspicion that he wasn't all that he completely purported to be. His name was Eest and I got the impression that he was the oldest one in the group.

Finally, the girl whose development branch was Mirror was the proverbial dark horse. Compared to Baedeker, she appeared rather curt and absent-minded, as if lost in her own thoughts. Still, it was Mirror who'd been the first to identify the exact model of my railgun and even asked if I had the right ammo for it. Also — although this might well be my own presumption — I got the impression that she was the only reason why the noble Axel had joined this particular merc group.

Although I wouldn't exactly call it a dream team, six Players were admittedly better than one. Besides, I'd even managed to come to a double agreement with them: first, to attack the Libs in order to rescue Arts, and then to join us on our journey to the U2 world. We could buy ourselves the passage for a fixed price — and luckily, with what I'd already forked out, we already had it. Whatever you say, corruption has its good points too.

In any case, once we'd sworn all the mutual oaths and once their glow had expired, Suggestic motioned us to follow him. We complied, especially seeing as the dilapidated house we'd just left suddenly exploded in such a tumult of indignant screaming as if someone had just awoken from illegal organ harvesting surgery minus a kidney.

"Oh, that's Ruffler coming out of Suggestic's trance," Baedeker said with a chuckle. "We'd better get out of here quick."

No one had any intention of arguing with her. The catman had already brought up a local minivan which admittedly looked more like a pile of spewed-out scrap metal. All the others hurried to pile in: first (predictably) Suggestic, and Axel being the last, having let in all the women and also myself. These noble types can be quite unfathomable.

The minivan turned out to be not as straightforward as its exterior suggested. It was fitted with an extensive dashboard, a whole bunch of knobs and buttons that studded the roof and the driver's seat, and even a GPS or something that looked like it. Generally, this rust bucket looked more like a small jury-rigged spaceship.

"Does it fly?" I asked.

Baedeker chuckled. "You should be grateful it still goes."

She wriggled her way to the front seat and rubbed her temples with her fingers. All the others quietened down, not showing any signs of anxiety. The catman wasn't in a hurry to pull away but he wasn't interested in cutting the engine, either, too busy watching Baedeker for some kind of command.

I turned back for a quick peek at the house. We shouldn't really hang around. Ruffler's mercs were already pouring out of the door, apparently having received a few kicks of encouragement from their boss. Although they hadn't yet drawn their weapons, I had a funny feeling they weren't chasing us just to discuss the weather.

Suggestic was the first to lose his patience. "Baedeker, how long is this all going to take?"

"How long is a piece of string?" she snapped back. "You have any idea of the traffic load here? I'm trying to calculate it as fast as I can. Okay, Eest, go first to H-13 and from there to the speedway. In the meantime, I'll check out the rest of the route."

Now we pulled away — so fast in fact that we very nearly collided with a huge truck. Only at the very last moment did the catman manage to avoid it.

“I’m so sorry,” he admitted. “My driving’s not up to much.”

Was it my imagination or did he actually blush?

“Serge, don’t listen to him. He’s a real expert, he just doesn’t like to blow his own trumpet. Now wait, I want you to turn off into H-15 instead.”

The numbers she’d mentioned turned out to be the highway’s levels. Further on, most of the lanes headed underground while some of them rose into the air like the threads of yeast dough. Airbikes sped through the sky above tower blocks plastered with publicity boards. They definitely didn’t need any traffic regulations.

The catman changed lanes a few times, heading higher and higher, until we turned off onto H-15. He was indeed much better than he’d claimed to be. The kind of speed he managed to coax out of this old jalopy gave me the impression that we whizzed past all the loaded trucks as if they were stationary.

“All done,” Baedeker said, entering our route into the satnav. “There’re two deviations ahead because of accidents. Once we clear them, it’ll be another fifteen minutes.”

“This development branch of yours, does it help you find your way around everywhere?” I asked.

“Not *everywhere* everywhere. Like, I was in Pelt once — which is a world not far from Grimmar — and I decided to look for a buried treasure. But all I found was some Archaut bones. You see, the locals worship them a bit like the Indians worship their cows in our world. Which makes them really precious for the Pelteans. For them, it’s a real buried treasure — but not for us, of course. That’s why my ability is a bit useless if you’re looking

for something abstract like dust or power. It has to be something that makes sense to you. By the way, what have you got in the way of your girl's clothes?"

"Nothing."

"That's not so good."

"Take this," Suggestic said, handing her a piece of parchment.

"Let me see. Cropped chestnut hair, slim build... Not much to go on, but I suppose it'll have to suffice."

"Do you mean you've accepted the mission to capture the girl?" Mirror said quietly.

Her question fell like a clap of thunder. Even the catman averted his gaze from the road to take a long look at Suggestic as if seeing him for the first time.

"Well, what did you want me to do?" Suggestic tried to explain himself. "I don't like the Libs any more than you do. But four kilos are four kilos."

"That's too mean even for you," Baedeker said.

I expected the conflict to be developed further. I seriously expected Axel to reach into the glove compartment and fling the proverbial glove to Suggestic's feet. The two girls would berate their informal leader while the catman would give him another look of absolute contempt like only cats can.

Still, none of this happened. Apparently, his behavior didn't come as a surprise to anybody. So I decided to ignore it too. He couldn't break a Player's Oath, anyway. So I had nothing to worry about. Hopefully not.

“Almost there,” the catman said, expertly navigating the lane between a lorry and the safety barrier.

Indeed, we’d come off the main road and were already several levels down, approaching some sort of suburb. Here, there wasn’t a single building higher than ten stories. The traffic wasn’t so congested here, the sky almost free of airbikes.

Judging by the map, we’d already gone past the building we were looking for. I hurried to point that out.

“You don’t really think, do you, that we’re going to enter it from the front?” Baedeker asked as she climbed out.

The residence of the Order of Libertarians was squeezed between gloomy-looking tower blocks. It wasn’t very tall, thirty feet at the most, looking as if it had been built to the Libs’ order. Its central driveway was graced with a grandiose statue of a man being freed from his chains and lined with security guards in gray uniforms.

I whistled my respect. “It’s quite serious, all this.”

“Well, what did you think?” Suggestic sniggered. “Baedeker, keep your eyes peeled.”

“Don’t worry, I’m watching,” she replied, rubbing her temples again.

“In the meantime, I could offer my humble opinion too,” the catman spoke. “I can’t see any suitable entry points next to the central doorway.”

Baedeker nodded without opening her eyes. “In other words, the front entrance is off limits. You’re a genius, nothing to say. Aha! I can see a small entry point on the eastern side. We could use that one.”

In order to access it, we were obliged to skirt the building through residential zones. We even had to pause and wait in one of them while

Suggestic tried to case the area.

“There’s a small door there,” he said, “apparently a maintenance entrance. But there’re sentries posted next to it. Which means I need two more people,” he paused, hesitating, “Axel and Serge.”

We climbed out of our hidey holes and approached the Order’s residence. By now, it was really close. All we had to do was cross the empty street which separated the two residential zones.

At this point, Suggestic left us without as much as a by-your-leave, and headed toward the three sentries pacing the street before the entrance. I was about to follow him when Axel stopped me,

“Wait a sec. They’re gonna come to us anyway.”

I couldn’t hear what Suggestic was telling them — but he seemed to speak a lot and very quickly too. The Libs’ patrol listened to him very attentively, hanging on his every word. He reminded me of the Pied Piper who’d already captured his victims and was now leading them down to the water’s edge. And we were supposed to play the part of the predatory waves.

“So what do we do with them?” I asked.

“We just whack them over the head and stun them,” Axel replied calmly as if we were discussing the choice of cream cakes in a bakery.

The three guards marched over to us in lockstep like soldiers who’d fallen behind a parade. They saluted — not to me, of course, but to my noble ginger-haired friend.

“Your Royal backside, your faithful squad of assholes reporting as ordered!”

“Very funny, Suggestic,” Axel said with a look of reproach at his partner who was laughing his head off. Without further ado, Axel then walked over to the guard nearest to him and knocked him out with a tasty left hook.

The guard went limp and slumped to the ground. The remaining two appeared confused as if watching a statue of an ancient god come alive and pee on a sacred manuscript.

“What’re you waiting for?” Suggestic said, apparently addressing me. He then dashed toward one of the two remaining guards, grabbed him by the throat and, reaching into his inventory for a knife, stabbed him several times.

The surviving guard must have realized that the shit was about to hit the fan. He raised a hand squeezing what looked like a massive pistol and almost fired it, when I belatedly remembered that this was “my” opponent, the one I was supposed to deal with.

Still, Axel moved even faster than the speed of my thought. Before I could realize what had just happened, the last sentry slumped onto the ground next to the first one. By then, our second victim had already crumbled to dust; Suggestic was busy going through the loot casting disapproving glances in my direction.

In the end, he just couldn’t keep it to himself any longer:

“We didn’t take you along for your pretty face. Have you ever killed anyone?”

“Sure.”

“If you think you can sit it out while we’re doing your dirty work for you, you’ve got another thing coming. That wasn’t in the agreement.”

“I can’t attack first. That’s in my karma’s rulebook.”

“What are you, some kind of holy monk?”

“Yeah, sort of.”

“You could have told us earlier.”

It wasn’t just that. By now, my lifelong habit of always waiting for my opponent to attack first had crumbled. To survive in the Game, you had to deal the first lethal blow. I knew this only too well. Still, I wasn’t used to fighting a dopey enemy who stared me in the eye like a stunned bull in a slaughterhouse.

“That’s just the ability Suggie has,” Axel said placatingly. “He can convince anyone of anything. His victims believe him, but only if their environment agrees with the illusion he spins. If it doesn’t, his hypnotic mirage disappears.”

“How can you be so cool about it?”

“I may be a knight in shining armor but I’m not an idiot. I try to keep my conscience clean but in this case, it’s all pretty straightforward. It’s either them or us.”

In the meantime, Suggestic approached one of the prostrated guards and slit his throat. He waited for the man to crumble to dust and started rummaging through his remains. He must have sensed something because he turned to me and met my incredulous stare.

“Now, let’s make it clear. We have a deal. It was me who entranced them, which means I get all the loot. There’s nothing for you here.”

I just blinked, unable to speak. What did you want me to say? That killing your enemies wasn’t a great thing to do? That these guys might have actually been quite nice despite our differences with their bosses? I knew

that Suggestic was doing it by the book, making sure we left no evidence behind. But still, something within me opposed this cold calculation.

“Come on, your Royal lordship, go get all the others,” Suggestic said while finishing off the third guard.

Axel left without saying a word, and soon came back with the rest of the group in tow. Baedeker just shrugged at the sight of the dust scattering in the wind. The other girl frowned but said nothing. The catman didn’t react at all. Instead, he pointed at the maintenance door as if encouraging us to keep going.

“The hinges are poor,” he said, instantly identifying its weak points. “We could just force it open.”

“I have a better idea,” Suggestic said.

He walked over to the doorway and pressed something to the magnetic lock. With a click, the door opened.

“I got it off one of the guards,” he explained. “After you!”

Strangely enough, Baedeker was the first to step in. This was indeed a maintenance entrance: a long, dark corridor which took us to another one forking off at right angles.

Unhesitantly, Baedeker turned right toward a large hall which led to another one. There, she surprised us again, feeling the walls until she found a tiny door opening into an upward stairwell.

“I thought they would keep prisoners in the basement,” Mirror offered.

“She’s there,” Baedeker said confidently, then gave Suggestic an expectant look.

“Serge, Mirror, Eest, you stay here and hold the fort till we’re back,” Suggestic replied. “We won’t be long.”

I was about to ask who we were supposed to “hold the fort” from. There was nobody there! Just a bunch of columns, statues and gilded vases. It looked like a restricted-access museum room, not the residence of an Order.

But before Suggestic could finish speaking, the loud wail of an alarm sliced through the silence.

That was quick! The Libs must have discovered the missing guards. So where were we supposed to expect an attack from?

Eest the catman wisely took cover behind a column. After a brief deliberation, I did the same. Mirror had already secreted herself in one of the numerous dark nooks and crannies.

The catman drew a complex-looking pistol and a katana sword, its razor-sharp blade glinting blue. Judging by the first shots he’d made, the gun was semiautomatic.

The bad news was, the attacking Libs were coming from two directions at once: from the main entrance as well as from the one we’d taken to come here.

I pulled out the railgun and fired into the depth of the long maintenance corridor. A volley of the choicest cuss words resounded — but my shot seemed to have cooled their zeal somewhat. The attackers froze in the corridor like a bunch of church mice, showing no further intention to fight through to us.

But the catman wasn’t having it easy at all. He’d already spent all of his ammo, wounding a couple of Players, and was locked with the others in a desperate hand-to-hand. His every movement was so graceful I couldn’t help admiring him. In a few seconds, he’d decapitated the Player nearest to

him and started removing Mantles from the approaching ones while constantly changing his position.

I even made an attempt at covering him, firing my railgun which by then had already recharged. I must have hit some of the approaching Players because I saw a few of them being flung backward by the impact — but still I didn't receive any kill messages. Did they have some protection on them? Shame.

The action was getting hotter by the second — but Mirror, damn her, showed no intention of engaging. I tried to look for her but couldn't find her. Where was she?

The enemy pressure kept growing. A few Players ran out of the maintenance corridor and took cover behind the columns, apparently not looking forward to another dose of my railgun.

I hunkered down, realizing perfectly well that as soon as I tried to shoot I'd find myself in a crossfire. By now, I could barely see the catman darting to and fro at the far end of the hall. I knew that his Vitality wasn't going to last very long now.

Then another Player arrived at the scene.

Development branch: ***Wisp***. You'd be hard pressed not to notice him. He walked openly, not even trying to hide, as if bullets couldn't harm him. He had no weapons at all. He was heading toward the catman, quickly and expertly, but without breaking into a run — as if he knew that Eest wouldn't be able to get away from him.

Eest didn't let us down. He made a feint, forcing this wispy individual to dodge, then attacked him with his katana. Its blade sliced through Wisp vertically upwards — but wherever the sword touched the Player, his body seemed to turn into wisps of smoke on impact, bubbling and seething. As soon as the katana had finished its travel, the Player returned to his fleshy

form and punched Eest who stood his ground, still trying to wound his attacker. But none of his blows met their target.

Oh well, time for me to interfere.

Afraid of wounding the catman, I took careful aim, waited for the right moment and fired. The wall behind Wisp collapsed — but he wasn't at all hurt, transformed into a seething cloud of smoke.

This time he wasn't in a hurry to regain his human shape. Instead, the wisps of smoke reached out for Eest, enveloping him.

I heard the catman scream. His vertebrae crunched. And I couldn't do anything!

Having said that...

I was about to activate Justice when Lady Luck decided to give us a chance. I managed to draw the joker out of their packet of marked cards. I looked at it open-mouthed, simply because I'd never seen anything like this before.

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Chapter 19

THE MOST DANGEROUS OPPONENT isn’t necessarily stronger or smarter than yourself. Because your most dangerous enemy ***is*** yourself. Normally, they say it figuratively, referring to some personal struggle with your inner demons. But right now, I was looking at exactly the opposite.

Mirror appeared out of nowhere and headed for Wisp who was still busy torturing the catman. She walked quickly and confidently, apparently not at all afraid. Usually pensive and short-spoken, she’d transformed before my very eyes, becoming resolute and unwavering like a giant iceberg which had dispensed with its fair share of Titanics in its lifetime.

Admittedly, she failed to impress the attackers. They weren’t in a hurry to prostrate themselves at her feet: on the contrary, they opened fire, splitting the columns and crumbling their fragments to dust.

Still, Mirror kept walking toward them. Only she was different now. Her body was losing its shape, dissolving into a faint veil of gas.

Finally, I knew what Mirror’s ability stood for.

She could emulate any Player and mimic their own ability. Apparently, she didn’t even need to touch them: just seeing them was enough for her.

Under the barrage of impotent fire, the shapeless cloud which had just been Mirror reached the catman.

That’s when the shit hit the fan.

I thought I’d glimpsed two female arms taking a swing within the cloud’s midst. The catman, his coat bloodied and matted, used the commotion to crawl away and take cover behind a shattered column. Me, I just couldn’t take my eyes off the two sparring Players using their identical abilities against each other.

It took me a while to notice that Wisp had started to weaken. His body shape revealed itself now and again through the mist.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Of course. He’d already been using his charges for quite a while before Mirror had arrived. He was running out now — while she still had plenty left. Of course she wasn’t as skillful in using his ability, but her lack of practice was more than compensated by her derring-do.

I almost missed the crunching sound of Wisp’s vertebrae being broken.

His body slumped to the ground. Then it began crumbling to dust.

Mirror wasn’t resting on her laurels. She must have instantly realized that she was now one of the strongest Players in this giant hall, so she went on wreaking havoc and death, forcing our attackers to retreat — or should I say, to flee erratically from the scene once they’d realized that all these war games weren’t worth it.

Admittedly, while she’d been busy dealing with the front, more enemies had surrounded us from the rear. I heard the rattling of automatic gunfire as a couple of figures slid into the hall.

The catman darted to intercept them. Even limping, he was much faster than I could ever be. I stayed put to cover him from a distance.

You’ve killed a Player who was hostile to you.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 35.

A change in development branch available: ***Practician.*** *In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.*

You've gained the Splinters spell.

Seeing his buddy crumble to dust and ashes, the attacker closest to me decided to go for me. He was a Purg: instead of scarpering to safety, he now stuck his sword out in front of himself and attacked, simultaneously casting some kind of spell.

Oh those wizard swordsmen in hi tech Central Worlds! Very well, mister, let's parry. And while you brandish your sword, I might rewind time for a change.

His spell fell from his fingers in a cloud of green pollen which promptly soaked into the floor. It hadn't harmed me in the slightest: it didn't appear to have any slowing, poisoning or other destructive effects whatsoever, so I just ignored it.

I slid the railgun back into my inventory and reached for my Katzbalger. How I wished I had my Gramr on me now!

The player was still lumbering on toward me, impatient to meet his death. Finally, he kicked off the ground and took a gravity-defying leap, slashing out across my chest.

Correction: I did manage to clumsily parry his sword with my own at the very last moment. The two blades met with a screech, sending a flurry of sparks into the air.

Still, another unpleasant thing happened just then. As soon as I wanted to swing round to face my enemy, I realized I couldn't lift my feet off the floor. Although I could still move them and even rotate them after a fashion, the actual toes seemed to be glued to the floor. The good news was, this probably turned me into an excellent twist dancer; the bad news was,

there was no one here to appreciate my freshly-acquired choreographic skill.

[∞]

Now I could finally see that the spell he'd cast earlier wasn't just a bunch of useless pollen that had crumbled to the ground. On the contrary: the cloud of pollen flew toward me, moving much faster than the caster himself could. And what was really bad, the time rewind point happened to be already *after* he'd cast the spell. So what was I supposed to do?

[∞]

On an off-chance, I lifted my left foot off the floor just as the cloud of pollen enveloped me, in imitation of the "praying mantis" martial style. And it actually worked: the spell only immobilized my right foot, which meant it couldn't affect my other limbs if they weren't touching the floor.

I could have probably tried some more, just to see if I could jump into the air at the moment the pollen connected with me. But I really didn't want to waste my time rewind charges. An immobilized leg wasn't a very big problem, really.

I ducked, almost hugging the floor, as the surprised-looking caster rocketed through the air above me. I even managed to deal him a blow with my Katzbalger — nothing too serious but at least I'd managed to remove one of his Veils, which was already a good thing. The Player swung round and, after some hesitation, started walking toward me.

Now I wished I could take my earlier words back. My bound right foot left me no space for maneuver whatsoever, which my attacker promptly realized. After a couple of blows, I was obliged to rewind time again — otherwise it wouldn't have ended well for me.

[∞]

This time I managed to strip him of yet another Mantle. The Player dodged my blow, his glare drilling a hole in me, but he showed no intention of giving up. I cast a curious glance at my railgun still recharging inside my inventory. How long was it going to take?

Help came from the least expected quarters. Apparently, today was Mirror's day. She'd already made quick work of all the small fry that had tried to attack us from the front and was now heading back — unfortunately, without activating Wisp's magic ability.

But now of all moments, I suddenly saw a massive barrel in her hands which began spewing fire. Although it admittedly looked very much like a sawn-off drainpipe, its effects proved to be almost as efficient as those of my own railgun.

My opponent had more Veils on him than a belly dancer from Arabian Nights. A good dozen, probably, as he must have thought he'd make quick work of me without much trouble. By the same token, compared to Morbian he was a choir boy. I'd already stripped him of two of them, and Mirror had now removed all the rest in a flurry of cascading sparks that had very nearly blinded me. It was a good thing I'd squeezed my eyes shut instead of shielding my eyes with my sword hand, because the Player was sent flying through the air right onto me, impaling himself onto my outstretched Katzbalger which went right through him like a needle through a piece of gauze.

Your Short Blades skill has increased to level 27.

You've killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: ***Pioneer****. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.*

You've gained the Ripple spell.

They didn’t have much in the way of abilities, did they? The notion flashed thoughtlessly through my mind. I was much more interested in Mirror who was now heading for me.

“I had everything under control,” I said.

“No you didn’t,” she said without looking at me. “How many charges does your gun still have?”

I reached into my inventory to check on the railgun. It said, “48%”. How was it possible? It had been 70+ just a moment ago!

Never mind. “Twelve charges,” I said. “But it takes a long time to recharge.”

“I noticed,” Mirror replied. “I want you to cover the corridor.”

After another ten seconds or so, the catman joined us, a little the worse for wear, his coat matted and crusted. Now he looked like a scruffy alley cat rather than the snow leopard he’d been before.

“I don’t think that we can last much longer,” he said, either complaining or simply stating the obvious. “They’re going to regroup and wait for reinforcements from the city. Then they’ll attack again.”

Mirror didn’t reply. There was nothing to say, really. He seemed to be right — almost. The Libs weren’t going to wait for any reinforcements. They had plenty of force as it was. It was just that we’d initially managed to catch them unawares.

They were coming for us again now, well organized this time, not trying to overpower us with numbers like they’d done earlier. Now they opened fire from the corridor I was supposed to be covering. Simultaneously, more Players tried to enter the hall in ones and twos. They

weren’t in a hurry, hiding behind columns and waiting. And I had nothing to offer against them.

I managed to stun one of them and strip him of his Mantle. Still, I failed to capitalize on my success. His buddies promptly dragged him back while my gun needed a new recharge.

My friends weren’t faring any better. The catman kept taking cover behind anything he could, not risking to throw himself forward against an unassailable enemy.

Mirror kept firing, taking good aim but still killing no one as our opponents didn’t spare any mana on more Mantles.

In other words, they’d cornered us in a pincer movement, about to surround us and destroy us slowly and methodically. Would be funny, wouldn’t it, if they invited us for a cup of tea instead, just to ask what the hell we were doing here. That wouldn’t have been the right treatment of suicidal terrorists who’d just walked into your hornet’s nest.

Personally, I was going to sell my life dearly to the highest bidder. I still had my railgun and one time rewind. As soon as the six Players semicircling us came closer, I...

Axel appeared as if from under the ground. Or rather, he dropped from the sky. I already knew from my childhood experiences that flying wasn’t the scary thing. It was the landing that could do you some damage. But our prince had just dropped on us from a considerable height and still remained in one piece.

The two swords in his hands appeared to be enveloped in purple flames. Although his movements weren’t as graceful as the catman’s, they were no less confident.

The Players immediately switched their attention to this new guest to our crazy party. I very nearly screamed, about to rush to his aid, when

Mirror’s strong hand grabbed me by the collar, pinning me to the spot.

“He’s got the Shield Bearer Avatar,” she said. “He can do it. You’d better help us.”

Indeed a whole horde of new Players was bearing down on us from the front entrance. Somehow I remembered what the old man had said back in the bar, that the Libertarians were the biggest Order on this side of Anchor World. I knew there were lots of them, but this was a bit of an overkill. Had they all been recalled from their leaves and sent here to deal with us?

At least now Suggestic had joined us too. He’d pulled out an impressive-looking shotgun which definitely didn’t use regular buckshot.

Still, I didn’t look at him because I was too busy looking at Baedeker dragging an almost unconscious Arts in her wake.

It took all of my willpower not to dash toward them. Arts could barely move her feet, her lips smashed, one eye swollen. Still, I could tell she was fully aware of what was happening around her. She was even saying something to Baedeker.

It wasn’t anger that I felt. It was just as if I had a surge of fiery lava running through my veins. An unbearable heat pressed on my chest from the inside. My hands visibly shook.

Still, I managed to reload it. I had no doubt as to the identity of those who’d inflicted this on Arts.

The Libertarian Players walked confidently toward us. By now, most of them were taking cover behind the only toppled column. Mirror and Suggestic only raised dust with their guns, crumbling the stone and occasionally stripping a less agile Player of their Mantle.

It was my turn now.

The recoil didn’t throw me back like it had done with Arts when she’d destroyed the camp’s dome. Still, I got the impression that my intestines had just received a jolt.

Then I went deaf. All of us did.

With a deafening crash, the column shattered into pieces. Probably. I wasn’t really sure because the bright flash had forced me to look away. And when I’d finally looked back, there was nothing there except for a large impact crater.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 36.
Your Shooting skill has increased to level 37.
Your Shooting skill has increased to level 38.

You’ve killed a Player who was hostile to you.
A change in development branch available: ***Cruiser****. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.*
You’ve gained the Taxidermy skill.
You’ve gained the Groan spell.

You’ve killed a Player who was hostile to you.
A change in development branch available: ***Glider****. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.*
You’ve gained the Geyser spell.

You’ve killed...

I didn’t finish reading. If my interface were to be believed, I’d killed eight Players in total. Eight! All the others had been scattered around. Now they were lying motionless, clearly concussed.

But me, I hadn’t felt anything. The heat in my chest had subsided somewhat. My cheeks felt flushed. To add to it all, a new message appeared in my interface which spoke for itself:

Your fame has increased to 37.

Your reputation has changed to Butcher.

Still, the fight was far from over. This was only a rather long pause. Those of the survivors who’d been the furthest from the center of the explosion had retreated, but they hadn’t left the scene. Our group too was trying to get itself together — and admittedly they were much quicker at it than me.

It took me a while to realize who it was that was shouting. Only a few seconds later, I figured out it was Suggestic’s voice, going hammer and tongs at the catman who only nodded in response. The only word I managed to make out was “Go and find it!”

So the catman set off in search of whatever it was, if you could call it so. He simply scanned the hall slowly with his eyes, taking in the crumbling columns. The place was a right old mess. But well, they shouldn’t have messed with me then, should they?

At the moment, the catman reminded me of a scanner rather than a living being. As for the actual living beings, they were too busy fighting at the other end of the hall.

Or should I say, Axel was. Armed with his Shield Bearer Avatar, he’d almost single-handedly destroyed the Libs’ second front. Mirror was now busy spraying the most stubborn ones with fire.

Finally, the last Player gave up and ran off back inside the black depths of the corridor. Axel turned and trotted toward us.

“I’m all out of charges,” were his first words.

“I am too,” Mirror admitted.

“I still have a couple but sitting around and yapping won’t help us much,” Suggestic said grimly. “Eest, you’d better hurry up before we’re goners!”

“Over there,” the catman pointed to a wall. “Its edges and foundations are charmed against damage, but not the wall itself. It also has some magic on it but it seems to be separate.”

“So you think we should try it?” Suggestic asked.

“We could, I suppose.”

I was only half-listening because by then, both Baedeker and Arts had joined us.

Arts and I exchanged glances. We didn’t need words. She could probably see the apology in my eyes, but still she pretended that nothing special had happened. As if we’d got lost in the metro, exiting it at two different stations. Can happen to anyone.

Which was probably why it took me a while to hear my own name.

“Serge, damn you! Are you asleep or what?”

Suggestic looked rather alarmed, to put it mildly. My lack of comprehension only served to infuriate him further.

“Think you can zap that wall?” he said, pointing. “With your wonder gun.”

I nodded. I wouldn’t say I liked this particular Player. Of all the motley crew of mercenaries, he was the one I felt the least affinity with. But

for some reason I could sense that he'd known was he was doing all along. So I promptly loaded my railgun and waited for it to recharge.

Then, once it was ready, I "zapped it".

This explosion was even worse than the first one. Only later did I realize that both Mirror and Suggestic had opened their mouths wide at the moment I did so.

As the song goes, "the wall came down". Although in our case, it simply crumbled to pieces.

Suggestic waved a commanding hand. Even though I couldn't hear him, I understood him quickly enough. I was about to help Arts but Axel had already scooped her up and headed toward the exit. That's right. This was exactly how a true noble-born knight would do it. They don't ask women whether they need saving. They just get on and do it.

In the end, it turned out that I was the weakest link. It was the catman who offered me his helping paw. Everything we'd just done must have been so unexpectedly brazen that the Libs still couldn't get their act together until now. At least they didn't try to fire at us even once in all the time it took us to get out of their residence.

Later, when even I had already crossed the road into the neighboring residential area, I heard some gunshots behind. Luckily, they couldn't cause us any harm.

We dove back into our van faster than an Olympic bobsleigh team. The catman shot off without waiting for the door to close, heading toward the highway.

"Holy shit," Suggestic gasped, grinning for the first time. "All the fame they gave me!"

Of course. He was the group's formal leader, wasn't he? The attack at the residence of the biggest mercenary Order in Meyer had to have had an impact on his popularity. Once we made it to that new world, he might have lots of contracts to look forward to. As well as a lot of hate from the Libs.

"Eest, climb three levels and put your foot down," Baedeker said. "We can't allow ourselves to be caught now."

"So where are we going?" I said.

"Where do you think we're going?" Suggestic chuckled. "To the Community, of course. We need to see the ruler before the Libs raise an alert on us all over this world."

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Chapter 20

YEARS AGO, I'D COME UP with this rather clumsy soundbite: a "life-changing point in sleep mode". That's when a situation can potentially develop in all kinds of unpredictable ways while you're just standing there knowing you can do nothing about it.

This is probably what a racing driver feels when he's late for the airport, stuck in the passenger seat of a cab. Had it been him driving, this surely wouldn't have happened. But the situation being what it is, all he can do is patiently wait for his predicament to be resolved somehow.

This was more or less what was happening to me now. The catman's driving skill — as well as his ability to squeeze every bit of speed out of this rust bucket — were about to decide the success of our whole enterprise, not to mention our very survival.

I suppose, a quick chat could have soothed my jumpy nerves, but the problem was, everyone seemed to be too busy to indulge me.

The catman, naturally, was too preoccupied clinging to the steering wheel. Baedeker promptly updated him on the traffic, her intense voice sometimes rising to a shout. Suggestic was reloading his gun and checking the items in his interface, producing what looked like antipersonnel mines and hand grenades, as if he were heading for war and not for the local ruler's court. Axel closed his eyes like a Buddhist monk and retreated within himself, oblivious of the noise and the bumpy ride.

Arts, too, was asleep. As soon as we'd climbed into the vehicle, Mirror had laid her hand on the girl's head, sending her into an uneasy, restless slumber. Her eyeballs rolled under her closed eyelids; her body jerked as if she was dreaming about fleeing from someone. Still, Mirror kept Arts' head firmly in her lap until finally, the girl's shaking began to gradually subside.

"She's had it bad," Mirror finally said.

"I know," I replied. "It's all because of me. It's my fault."

Mirror cast me a look of mild curiosity, as if watching a bug crawling along a windowsill which suddenly spread its wings and took off into the air. "Sometimes I think this whole Game thing is a cruel joke," she said. "You can't give these kinds of powers to any creature, however intelligent. You can't make them into Gods if they can't yet grasp the purpose of their own existence. There's only one price they'll have to pay for all this."

"Which is?" I asked, second-guessing her answer.

"Death. They may say we're immortal, but that's what every Player is heading for. It's the logical closure of our existence. And strangely enough, the stronger we become and the more Avatars we amass, the closer we are to our upcoming deaths. But that's not the question. The question is, are you ready to die?"

"Absolutely not," I replied. "I still have too many unanswered questions about this," I swept a hand around the cab. "And I still need answers from those who made me into a Player."

Mirror smiled softly. "Then it should be easier for you. You still have this unbridled curiosity within. You're still discovering life, which makes it worth living. It gives you purpose."

"Isn't it the same with you?"

She smiled again but said nothing.

At this point, Axel stirred out of his sleep. I got the impression he'd been listening in rather curiously. There was definitely something going on between those two. Still, now wasn't the right moment to think about it, either.

The catman sped on on a wing and a prayer, threading his way past all the slow trucks clogging the road. Baedeker kept guiding him, occasionally sticking her head out the window. What could she possibly see there? I followed her example but saw nothing, just more airbikes flashing to and fro over the multiple-lane highway.

Having said that... a few of them seemed to be hovering directly above us.

Oh...

"The good news is, they don't yet know where we're going," Baedeker commented. "The bad news is, it won't take them long to find out."

"That was quick," Suggestic said, showing no surprise.

"Well, what do you want? Eest, it's better you take the tunnel from here. It might be a couple miles longer that way but we just might shake them off. I don't think they're gonna follow us there."

She was right. We began to drop altitude, changing lanes down, until we found ourselves in the tunnel. The Libs were smart enough not to follow us down here.

"I still can't work out how you expect us to get to the Community from here," the catman grumbled.

"Easy. Now focus and swing into the opposing lane. Do it quick!"

I literally heard him grind his teeth. Still, the catman didn't dare disobey his navigator. No idea what he must have felt when all the oncoming traffic started honking at us. I too might need a change of underwear, if you know what I mean. I don't think I'd been that scared for a long time.

Had Eest been a human born in Russia, he would have commented on his advance in a nice broadside of the choicest expletives. But being a beastman, he simply puffed and wheezed as he eased his way past the goliath trucks intent on flattening us. All the others had already dropped whatever they'd been doing, their white-knuckled hands gripping the edges of their seats, their eyes focused firmly on the road. Arts alone was sleeping soundly with Mirror's hand covering her head.

When finally we emerged from the tunnel and Baedeker pointed at some mark on the GPS screen, I heaved a deep sigh — not exactly relieved, but still.

"We seem to have lost them," Suggestic said, studying the sky.

"I bet Eest's bushy tail that they went in the opposite direction," Baedeker replied. "It might take them a quarter of an hour to work it out. What's this look on your face, Eestie? *I* don't have a tail to bet, do I?"

The catman shook an incredulous head, casting a quick glance in her direction. For some reason, it soothed my nerves completely. He kept breaking every rule in the traffic book switching lanes until finally we rejoined the heavy traffic heading for the Community.

When we were only a few minutes away from our destination, Suggestic told us what we were supposed to do. He also asked politely where exactly we were supposed to collect my stocks of aetylene. To which I replied with equal courteousness that he shouldn't worry about that. I had everything under control.

“You don’t mean you’ve had them on you all along?” Suggestic asked.

“Why, would it have changed anything?”

“Well, what do you think?!” Suggestic exploded, then promptly took a grip on himself.

But I already knew. Had I told them I’d had the stuff on me, we wouldn’t have had this agreement now. Suggestic would have killed me there and then, right next to the Aides’ residence. He would have collected the aetylene and all the loot I’d have dropped, and he would have even come up with some explanation to offer to the Libs’ leader. I was almost sure he’d have gotten away with it. All our “cooperation” was based on the Oaths they’d sworn, which in turn had been made on the presumption that I hadn’t had the aetylene on me.

I’ll tell you more: all the others must have realized it as well. Probably, with the exception of Mirror who once again was oblivious to the world, pensively stroking Arts’ head.

Baedeker cast Suggestic a reproachful look. Axel heaved a sigh of disapproval. The catman didn’t say anything.

Not that I cared. We were almost there, anyway.

“As soon as you take us to the next world,” I told Suggestic, “you’ll get what we’ve agreed upon.”

Suggestic nodded unenthusiastically.

If the truth were known, now I was getting my suspicions too. I’d already given them the money. We had a bunch of Libs on our tail. And to top it all, I wasn’t sure I could trust my new partners, either. The only thing still preventing us from doing something we might later regret was the Oath we’d sworn.

“These are Libs,” Mirror said softly, pointing at three Players scanning the area.

“We’ll have to split,” Suggestic replied. “I’ll go to the Community and see the ruler while you guys need to split into two groups and head for the Gatehouse.”

To say I tensed up would be an understatement. I really didn’t want him to leave right now. Now because I felt safe with him — but because, as the saying goes, you need to keep your friends close but keep cunning bastards like him even closer.

He must have understood the meaningful look I gave him. “Just don’t crap yourself, I’ll be back. After this attack, my Relationship with the Libs has gone through the floor, while my Fame has grown. I’m least of all interested in staying behind here.”

“Serge,” Baedeker said, “Sugg may be a certified piece of shit but he’s not a rip-off merchant.”

“Oh, thank you,” Suggestic said sarcastically.

“Okay,” I said, feeling obliged to interrupt them. “I’ll go with Axel and Arts. See you in the Gatehouse.”

The choice had come easy to me because it was too obvious. As soon as we got out of the van, Axel promptly picked up Arts who was still asleep. Honestly, his recent behavior had endeared me to him quite a lot. He’d defended that stranger in front of the Libs’ leader, he’d given me back my railgun and basically, he seemed to walk the talk. Which was more I could say about almost anyone, let alone a Player.

“Mirror, you’re coming with me,” Suggestic said as we parted ways.

In the end, we had three equal groups. Baedeker went with the catman, Suggestic took Mirror with him, and I had Arts and Axel. Considering that I now had one of the strongest fighters on my own team, we could disregard Arts' unconscious state. We could well manage without her. Maybe.

By then, our Lib chasers were on our tail again. Even with their airbikes, they couldn't have made it any faster. Our split had only mislead them for a couple of seconds; after their initial hesitation, they were on our case again. One of them followed Suggestic, apparently having identified him as our team leader. Another one went after the catman, while the third one... no, he didn't chase after us, disappointing as it sounds. He headed for the Syndicate. I may not be the vainest of people but my ego was admittedly hurt.

Axel walked confidently through the maze of side streets, past all the houses, avoiding the main square. Only now did I realize how huge their Community was, much bigger than my own back in Cesspit. And that's considering the fact that some of the buildings were multi-level highrises.

To my question why would local Players need so much real estate, Axel shared a very unexpected bit of info. Apparently, in all of the highrises Players could only occupy the lower floors. The upper stories were meant for the local Commoners. They also had different entrances for both: those lining one side led into the Community while the buildings' opposite entries were meant for regular mortals. Still, a number of Players, just like that dude in the jumpsuit whose apartment we'd hijacked earlier, preferred to live with the Commoners in the city proper. The reason was simple: the rent was much lower there.

By then, I'd already worked out that being the ruler of the local Community was an honorable and very lucrative job. I was pretty sure that he could buy up one of the skirting worlds if he really wanted to. No idea why he'd even need so much money. I couldn't shake off the picture of dozens of one-gallon glass jars stuffed under his bed, all of them filled to the brim with dust.

Unsurprisingly, we were the second to reach the Gatehouse. Baedeker and the catman had taken a shortcut across the main square, so they were there already, waiting for the three of us.

The Lib spy who'd followed them stood openly about fifty feet away from the entrance, not even trying to hide. When he saw Axel emerge from the gateway, he took a few steps back, but that was the extent of it.

By then, Arts had already come round and protested against being transported so comfortably. I wish she hadn't. Last time someone carried me in their arms was my Dad in my early childhood days whenever I'd fallen asleep in his and Mom's bedroom. Life had been so simple and easy then...

"Keep your hair on," Axel said, noticing my desperate gaze scanning the square for the remaining two group members. "They'll come."

I wish! Apparently, the local ruler's residence was a bit further on behind several other buildings. From where I stood, I couldn't even see it. With every passing minute, I was getting jerkier. And seeing as by now five more Lib spies had joined the one who'd been here when we'd first come, we risked being cut off from Suggestic entirely.

Provided he came.

Luckily, today I wasn't meant to lose my faith in fellow beings. Finally, Suggestic showed up, accompanied by explosions and flashes of light in his wake.

No, scratch that: a thunderous explosion came first, as awesome as if the sky was about to collapse onto the earth — and then Suggestic came. He didn't even try to shoot back: he must have cast plenty of protection spells on himself. Ignoring his enemies' spells and constant firing, he kept barging forward.

Mirror followed at a considerable distance which gave me the impression she'd done it on purpose. She moved backward facing the enemy, running in short bursts and firing only occasionally.

A cold shiver ran down my spine.

Even the dumbest of Players could see she wouldn't make it to the Gatehouse. As soon as Suggestic reached us, the attackers would switch their undivided attention to the girl who was hopelessly behind her leader.

I glanced at Axel. He ground his teeth so hard that his jaws might have exploded any second, lending his face a crazed expression.

He ran out of the Gatehouse, drawing his swords on the go. Before I could get my brain in gear and reach for the railgun, the catman had too run out after him.

"Player!" the Gatekeeper's voice boomed.

I turned round. The Gatekeeper had already left his pedestal, heading for me.

Oops, sorry, sir.

I ran out of the safety of the Gatehouse — but at least now I could use my weapons.

I took in the setup as I ran. The five Lib fighters nearby weren't a problem. Axel and Eest would sort them out in no time. But the six chasing after Suggestic and Mirror presented a more interesting target. Most of them had modern weapons and some quite interesting development branches, a couple of which were a complete mystery to me. For instance, what the hell was that bearded dude supposed to be? An ***Elastico***?

On a hunch, I pointed the gun at him and took an unhurried aim before pulling the trigger.

Your Shooting skill has increased to level 39.

Killing him would have been too much to hope for, I suppose. At least he flew head over heels and dropped to his back, showered by the fireworks of disintegrating protection spells. Better than nothing, I suppose.

Still, there was plenty of repercussions that came with this tiny victory.

You are charged with deliberate violation of the law and order of the world of Meyer, committed in front of eyewitnesses. In the next 24 hours, you must give explanations to the ruler of one of its Communities, otherwise you will be outlawed!

I wouldn't say that the square was crowded but yes, there were plenty of eyewitnesses. Some of them had dashed back at the first sounds of the gunfire: either to fetch the local Guards or simply to take cover.

Great, Serge. The last missing piece in your "I am persona non grata" achievement. Elysium, Mechilos and now also Meyer. Then again, considering that my potential destination lay in a totally opposite direction, this place wasn't something I was gonna miss.

My friends must have shared my philosophy because the five attackers that were the closest to me were now down to three, and they weren't having it easy. Suggestic made it past them without any problems because they had too much on their collective plate to take care of him.

Now that I'd made myself too conspicuous, I was obliged to put my railgun away and dive back into the Gatehouse. Good timing, too, because that single shot had drawn all the enemy fire to myself.

A couple of seconds later, Suggestic barged in, ducking behind the heavy door. After a brief pause, the catman and Axel joined us too.

Axel? That was a surprise. Had he left Mirror to die, dooming her to the fate of a reluctant human shield? So much for his apparent feelings for her!

My unasked question hung in the air because the next moment, a bizarre deformed hand grabbed at the door, its palm and fingers abnormally stretched as if their owner had just escaped the proverbial bed of Procrustes.

Before I could gather my wits about me, the wobbly jellified form of what must have been Mirror darted through the door. She indeed looked like a stretched version of herself, gradually regaining her natural shape.

So that's what ***Elastico*** must have meant!

"Wow, look at yourself, woman," Baedeker said, just as amazed as I was.

Mirror didn't even smile. She glanced at us, then switched her gaze to the Gatekeeper. We understood.

"One moment," Suggestic grumbled. He trotted toward the door, stuck his hand out and gave our attackers the finger. A gesture that required no explanation in any of the worlds, equally offensive in all of them.

After a brief pause, Suggestic retrieved his hand — and just in time too because the Gatehouse was immediately peppered with bullets. I was even worried that the Gatekeeper might venture outside in order to bring the Libs to justice.

Luckily, he ignored their petty hooliganism entirely. He probably didn't see their actions as life-threatening. Good.

Suggestic poured the dust into the bowl, all the while drilling me with his glare as if saying, "I'm even obliged to pay your fare, see?" Then he motioned us toward him.

“Upon special decree, all travel to the core of Central Worlds is only permitted with special dispensation from the rulers of—”

“I know, I know!” Suggestic interrupted the Gatekeeper, reaching for a piece of parchment. “Here you are, sir.”

The Gatekeeper took the paper from his hands and almost instantly put it away, having barely glanced at its contents. These guys probably had to take a speed-reading course. All the others stood around the stone and held their hands.

Suggestic uttered the name of the next world. I bit my tongue before I could add the word Discotheque. God only knows where the Gatekeeper would have teleported us then.

But seeing as I’d kept silent, he’d sent us to the right place. Probably. In any case, Suggestic and his group confidently headed for the exit. Even Arts gave me an encouraging nudge on the shoulder and mouthed quietly, “Come on, don’t be shy.”

I would have probably asked her why she expected me to be shy — but then I saw a group of Players waiting for us by the exit which resembled an airport gate sleeve. Each of them approached a group member until only Baedeker, Arts and myself were left without an escort.

We didn’t have to wait long. After a minute, more Players arrived. One of them walked over to me and asked politely,

“Is this your first time in our world?”

“Yes.”

“In which case, please follow me.”

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Chapter 21

THE MORE A COUNTRY IS DEVELOPED, the stricter the divide between the rights and duties of its citizens. You're free to do what you want, as long as it doesn't upset the applecart of common wellbeing. Not the wellbeing of a corrupt official in a cushy job, oh no: those will be replaced by a dedicated institution aiming to achieve what's best for everyone.

Which is an extremely difficult thing to do. To be honest, practically impossible. Because sooner or later, every person in power realizes that his or her spot on the gravy train is only temporary. In a way, he is also a time traveler like myself. And in the brief time he's in power he's desperate to provide for himself and his nearest and dearest with the best that his position can procure. That's when it all goes pear-shaped; from a regular democracy drowning in corruption to a totalitarian empire where human life is disposable.

Although I didn't know exactly how this world had arrived at the stage it was at now, but it felt like it must have been the right thing at the right time. To begin with, the Player that helped me was more of an assistant than a snoop.

"Welcome to the Commonwealth of United Worlds. We live in World Unit Two, or U2 for short. All Players arriving here have to comply with a number of requirements."

"Let me guess. You're hiding from commoners here, are you not?"

My assistant shrugged as if not understanding why I had to ask him that. “I’m afraid this is unavoidable. This world is far too advanced. Too many commoners might want to get hold of our Players’ powers.”

For some reason, I thought of Noggle. Although a medieval world, it still had the same problems. Then again, did I really think that Cesspit was any better? All creatures, including humans, will always crave more power than they already have. For them, arriving at this world would have been literally like hitting the jackpot. And the stronger the aspiring commoners, the stricter the precautions Players would need against them.

“We have a certain set of rules that all Players must adhere to if they want to avoid serious problems,” my assistant said. Interestingly, his development branch was ***Catcher***. “For that reason, I’m obliged to clue you in on a few things. Please follow me.”

We left the “airport gate sleeve”. Immediately I found myself in the Community, judging by the great number of Players who were either guarding the entrance or strolling peacefully in the distance.

And behind them lay an enormous city reaching up to the sky.

I froze, gawking at the spires crowning its towers. All kinds of flying vehicles hovered in the air looking like a cloud of insects attracted by the light which appeared to flood everything around.

If the world of Meyer was an aperitif for a humble traveler like myself arriving from the backwater world of Cesspit, then this “World Unit Two” proved to be the proverbial main course. Despite its big-brotherish name, it was mind-boggling.

This world had swallowed me whole, digested me and spewed me out. All I could do now was wallow in my own humility as Catcher continued his diatribe.

“Over there,” he said, pointing to a modern low building made of some unusual-looking metal.

Once we were inside, I realized that the walls were in fact made of some kind of reinforced glass. We could see the street outside as plain as plain could be.

All the other group members were already here too. Each of them was already seated at a massive gray table next to their own assistant. I could see no computers or even stationary. The only other thing on the table was a piece of parchment — *the* piece of parchment which I’d just seen being handed over to the Gatekeeper, one of the magic in-Game kind conjured up from a sprinkling of dust.

It was inserted into a strange square object which reminded me of a hand scanner: just a tiny black box without any knobs or wires. If you looked at it really closely, you could see that the yellowed parchment was slowly moving through the machine, emerging from the other end all covered in printed matter. Was it some sort of typewriter? Oh well.

“Over here,” my assistant motioned me to my seat, then slumped onto a chair next to it without waiting for my reply.

I followed suit. The seat turned out to be extremely uncomfortable. Did they do it so that their visitors felt out of their comfort zone or was I just being paranoid?

“I would like you to give me your full name, the name of your home world as well as other worlds that you visited recently, listing the object of your every visit. You also have to indicate all transit points you used, in chronological order.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but I think you forgot to introduce yourself. Is this all absolutely necessary?”

“I didn’t forget,” my assistant said, making it clear that he was in charge. “I just didn’t think it changed anything. You can’t enter our world without filling in the immigration card first. So, where were we?”

Not that I had much choice, really. I’d have loved to tweak the truth a little — but the sight of the printed sheet covered in mysterious symbols seemed to dampen my enthusiasm. My Intuition, too, was fluttering desperately within my chest, trying to warn me against the dangers of lying right now.

So I didn’t. Admittedly, most of his questions were pretty straightforward. I did falter a little when asked to explain the purpose of my recent journey to Mechilos. The questions about my visit to Hist were equally uncomfortable.

My assistant didn’t take his watchful stare off me the whole time. “Purpose of your visit to World Unit Two?”

“As you’ve just said. It’s transit. I’m actually traveling to Anchor World.”

He gave me a long look normally reserved for those talking to lunatics. “In order to continue to Anchor World, you need to obtain a special pass from the Council of Community Rulers. And you can’t get there via a regular Gate. You need to travel to the Original God’s Temple and use their portal there.”

“Would you mind showing them on the map for me, please? Both the Council and the Temple?”

He hesitated. Still, my courteousness must have played its part as he conjured up a map on a piece of parchment and handed it to me. It disintegrated in my hands as I absorbed the information.

Aha. Judging by the map, the Temple was miles away — and I had a funny feeling that I simply didn’t have the right kind of money or

connections to be admitted.

“Do you have Stealth?” my assistant asked.

“Yes, I do.”

“Does your Linguistic skill cover the Rogdean language?”

“Not really.”

“Which means you can’t communicate with the local commoners.”

The yellowed sheet of parchment stopped its slow progress through the wondrous scanner, then very nearly shot out completely, the symbols in its bottom third crossed out by a long diagonal line.

It didn’t feel good at all.

The Player asked me a few more questions, apparently just to tick off a few boxes, then ripped the sheet out of the scanner and raised it over his head.

Immediately a jittery young lad ran over to him, snapped the paper from his hand and disappeared in the depths of this bizarre institution.

“The Abbas will check the veracity of your replies in a moment,” my assistant said. “Then I’ll make a decision.”

I nodded. My knees were slightly shaking. A trickle of sweat ran down my spine despite the pleasant temperature.

By now, Axel and Mirror had already completed their interviews and gone outside. All the others, including myself, were awaiting their verdicts from their mysterious Abbas security chief.

Finally, in due time their decisions arrived. Baedeker was the first to receive hers, followed by the catman and Arts. Suggestic had to wait a little, but eventually, he too was released, while I was still fidgeting in my highly uncomfortable seat.

So when the jittery lad finally re-emerged, I very nearly jumped. He brought out a few sheets of paper and a small box which he set on the desk next to the Catcher.

My assistant studied the papers and nodded — whether to me or to his jittery assistant, or maybe even to his own thoughts.

“Seeing as this is your first visit to the Commonwealth of Central Worlds, you’ve been granted a seven-day visa to Unit Two. There’re certain rules you should keep in mind. You can’t reveal your true identity to the local commoners. You can’t exhibit aggressive behavior toward other Players or commoners. You can’t overstay your visa. Once your seven-day allowance has expired, you have to report back here to the assignment center and either leave our world or offer a compelling reason for us to extend your visa. The visa fee is two hundred grams.”

“Thanks,” I said as I accepted the stamped parchment and laid the required amount of dust on the desk, about to leave.

“That’s not all,” he stopped me. “You must remember your cover story in case the commoners’ security workers might want to run a check on you. For them, you work as a genome editor. Your address is Volng-3 East 206, appt. 55. Here’s a visual translator, free of charge,” he handed me something that looked like a flat button. “You can also buy an auditory and conversational translator at your own expense. They’re two hundred gram each.”

I checked my kitty. That was all I had left: a couple hundred grams, and I might need it later, so parting with it now wouldn’t be a wise thing to do, even though speaking the local language could also come in handy, that’s for sure.

“Maybe later,” I said, turning the ‘button’ in my hands. “How do I use it?”

“Just stick it to your temple.”

I did as I was told. The sensation was rather strange: a tickle, not entirely unpleasant, as the thing sank under my skin, leaving only a tiny bump as the reminder a its presence.

“The visual translator will remain active for the duration of your visa, which is also a week,” my assistant told me. “Upon its expiry, it will disintegrate, as will your visa. If you don’t report here at the end of your stay, you’ll be deported. That’s it for now.”

I climbed back to my feet feeling like I’d been hit with a ton of bricks.

Go to the Central Worlds, they said. It’s gonna be fun, they said. Only the rules seemed to be infinitely tougher here than either in Elysium or Mechilos even. Probably because the local commoners had much better chances of killing a Player than those in my home world of Cesspit.

Thus pondering, I saw myself out of the building.

Immediately I noticed that I could read the shop signs, even though their meanings remained unclear. *Reconstructive Surgery: Rogdeans*; *Popular Players’ Records*; *Betting Office*; *Mercenaries; Security and Escort...* Some of the signs were familiar: the Syndicate, a gun shop, a clothes arcade and a few banks, including my own.

But that wasn’t the most interesting thing. Now I could finally see the Rogdeans: the native population of this world.

They were short creatures, barely reaching my chest, with huge heads and even bigger eyes. They had gray skin and very long fingers. If

anything, they reminded me of aliens the way they're portrayed in my own world. And now I finally knew the reason for it.

"We thought he was trying to sell you a space cruiser," Suggestic stirred. "Let's settle accounts now. We've done our part of the deal. We've saved your girlfriend and delivered you here. Give us the aetylene, and we'll part ways. We'll sell half of it here and escape through Unit One to the opposite worlds. Come on, let's get it done."

"Guys, I'm afraid I still need your help," I said. "In order to travel to Anchor World, I first need to get to the Temple of the Original God."

"In other words, you're defying your own Oath?"

"No, I—"

I didn't finish. A powerful spasm shuddered my entire body, very nearly sending me to the ground. My vision darkened; my mouth went dry. My breathing seized as if knocked out of me.

"This is what happens when you attempt to break the Oath," Suggestic said, leaning over me. "So what about our aetylene?"

I scrambled back to my feet and retrieved the cans. Suggestic deftly secreted them in his own inventory.

"Enjoy your stay," he said, saluting me. "Come on, guys, let's move it."

"Sorry, Serge," Baedeker said. "There's no way the locals are gonna let you anywhere near the Original God's Temple. They make good money taking people there. And if you try to fight your way in there, you'll sign your own death sentence. Even if you survive, this world will forever remain off limits to you as a transit point. Meaning you'll never be able to go back to the safety of Cesspit. You'll never be able to enjoy the goofy

glamor of Meyer or the warm seas of Ooont ever again. I’m sorry but this isn’t the kind of job we can help you with.”

Mirror walked over to me and cast me a long look. Maybe, just maybe, if she agreed to help me now, Axel just might follow, and all the others might tag along.

Still, Mirror’s common sense hadn’t left her. “You’re impatient to reach your goal just like a moth, ignoring the fact that the bright light that attracts you might turn out to be the flames of a bonfire. Please be careful.”

Axel shook my hand. The catman bowed.

That was the extent of their farewells. Unhurriedly the mercenaries walked away. Suggestic looked very pleased with himself, saying something in a low voice to the others. Probably telling them how they would sell some of the aetylene and get the hell out of there to squander the rest of their ill-gotten gains.

“It all turned out for the better,” Arts spoke.

“What d’you mean?”

‘They’re mercenaries, after all. Good job you thought of making them swear the Oath. As it is, we’ve had more help from them than we could have hoped for.”

“Yeah, maybe. You okay?”

“Strangely enough, I’m not that bad. I can still fight if it comes to that.”

“I know. What did the Libs want from you?”

“They wanted me to tell them the coordinates of the Russian submarine,” she said sarcastically. “And when I couldn’t tell them that, they

asked me who might have destroyed their camp. You came along just in time."

"I'm very sorry."

"What's that got to do with you? You've done everything you could. I suppose I'm the proof: I'm standing here in front of you now instead of being stuck in the Libs' torture chamber. You'd better tell me what the hell we're supposed to do. Because there's no way they're gonna issue us a pass to Anchor."

"Why not?"

"Because all the worlds are making money on it. You'd better tell me why we need to go there?"

"We need to charge an artifact."

"And what do you intend to charge it with?"

"With dust."

"That's right! This is where dust comes from, isn't it?"

"Exactly. So this Council of Community Rulers, it simply smuggles it out, is that it?"

"Yep. I just don't understand why Gatekeepers allow Players there. Still, that's how it is. They even help raise the Players' Reputation to make sure they can travel to Anchor. All that the Council does is seek them out, send them to Anchor to farm some dust, and take their cut. And you want them to let you through for free. Because we don't have anything on us that they might find even remotely interesting."

"Which means we might have to fight our way through."

“Didn’t you hear what that girl has just said? We’ll be outlaws and this entire branch of the Interworld Network will be off limits for us.”

“Very well, let them do it. Come on now. We need to take a good look around.”

The first port of call on my list was *Popular Players’ Records*.

It was a small office with a very bored Purg in charge. Arts whispered that the main inhabitants of Unit Two believed all service and trade jobs to be below their status. Quite a few Rogdeans owned shops, bars and rental firms managed by Players from other worlds. In this respect, they were a bit like the Saudis offering jobs to poorer Middle East nationals. Actual Rogdean Players were few and far between, for obvious reasons. The crime rate here was virtually non-existent, just as in all the other Central Worlds. This place was a far cry from Purgator.

I listened to her half-heartedly as I studied the inside of the little shop. The thing which drew my attention was a large electronic display listing twenty names. I located my humble self at number 9.

Name: Serge
Human/Korl halfblood
Development branch: Time Master
Avatars: 5

Arts’ name was listed two places above mine.

Seeing my interest, the Purg shopkeeper cheered up. He started saying that for just half a kilo of dust, he could provide more details about any of the listed persons, which was mere peanuts for a wanted Player with a lot of money on his head. He cut himself short, glanced from me to the display searching for the right name, then looked back at me again, somewhat warily this time.

Aha. So he recognized me. Which meant he must have had all the names of my Avatars as well as all the abilities that came with them — and probably my description too. Not good. On the other hand, I was only No 9 on the list, Arts being No 7. Apparently, I had something to aspire to.

My mood, which had been foul to begin with, had now plummeted even further. I was about to leave this admittedly interesting place, curious how popular this shop actually was, — but before I could do so, the Purg received a parcel via what looked like a pneumatic tube system. Inside the packet was a large crystal which he hurried to absorb.

Immediately, the sequence of names on the list changed. Or rather, a new name added to them, No 13:

Name: ???
Human
Development Branch: Suggestic
Avatars: 2

Aha! An update! I'd love to know how this system worked. Just out of curiosity, I double-checked the first line:

Name: Juggernaut
Gnome
Development branch: AP Gunner
Avatars: 4

Even I had more Avatars than he did. Then again, he must have done something truly special to end up first on the list. Never mind.

"Where to now?" Arts asked. "To the Syndicate?"

""Oh no," I said, remembering Meyer. "Enough Syndicates for one day."

Seeing as the local Players had this wonderful shop at their fingertips, I wasn't really looking forward to confronting any fans. I wasn't in the mood to start dishing out punches and autographs.

Without hesitation, I splurged on a copy of the map listing the Temple and gave it to Arts. How could we have descended to this state? Only just now, I'd had almost ten kilos on me, which was now reduced to less than two hundred grams.

Still, look how far that money had taken me. I was now literally one step away from my goal — and this goal was worth any amount of means.

"Can you speak with the locals?" I asked.

'Sure. I bought their whole language set, but only for two weeks. I told them I'd come here to study the Rogdean culture."

"Excellent. In which case, let's start with their architecture. Let's go look for that wretched Temple of theirs."

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Chapter 22

HAVE YOU EVER NOTICED that in big cities, everything's arranged for people's convenience? The bigger the city, the better its infrastructure. A village dweller would marvel at the fact that the nearest town has more than one tarmacked road, while the denizen of the said town would gawk at all the parks and neat boulevards of a big city. And the native of a big city would grimly contemplate all the traffic junctions and the concrete jungle of a true metropolis. And so on and so forth.

We were now in the city of Reg. Not a city even but a huge agglomeration which also included the local Community. Its structure was so orderly and streamlined that even provincial idiots like us could find our way around.

We started navigating it by changing some money. The exchange rate of dust to the local credits was 1 to 2.5. We spent everything we still had left on us on two tiny square cards. You could use them everywhere, even in the Syndicate if you didn't happen to have any dust on you.

While we were at it, we also found out the location of the Temple of the Original God. Apparently, the local commoners called it The Pagoda of Past Lives. No idea what that was supposed to mean, but knowing it could save us a lot of time trying to find it.

Our next port of call was a small glass elevator clinging to an impossibly high steel stanchion. I looked up, studying a multitude of platforms located at different levels overhead. There, I could just make out

the elongated outlines of heavy autonomous planes which slightly resembled cargo trucks.

Arts confidently walked over to a control console and entered:

The Pagoda of Past Lives

A mark lit up on the map, indicating its location. But that wasn't all. The smart machine also offered to calculate our route for us, then politely inquired whether we wished to be transported to the relevant platform. Once we'd replied to the affirmative, the elevator's doors slid open, inviting us inside.

As we stepped in, we were met by a pleasant cooling draft and soft discreet music. Below lay the enormous city which began to entangle us in its snares as soon as we began to ascend.

The city wasn't just big: it was absolutely enormous. Boundless. It was as if it filled the entire local world. The squat figures of the Rogdean passersby grew ever smaller until they resembled tiny ants bustling around below. Luckily for me, the elevator soon came to a halt before my acrophobia could set in.

Before opening the doors, the console once again displayed our further route. We were only six stops away from tour destination.

In order to access the platform, we had to pass through one of the many small turnstiles. There were only a couple of locals waiting there who paid us absolutely no attention. That's a big city for you: they have their own communication protocols. Or the absence thereof.

I didn't even bother to find out how much the fare was. The turnstile obediently swallowed our plastic cards, then spewed them out back to us. In actual fact, thinking pragmatically, we wouldn't have to come back this way. As the song goes, our entire journey was the proverbial one-way ticket.

Finally, a “bus” hove-to next to the platform and unhurriedly pulled over.

It turned out to be perfectly normal inside. Two rows of seats, some handrails, and large panoramic windows. Admittedly, I didn’t see any emergency glass hammers anywhere accompanied by the curt survival instructions. Probably, they didn’t need them: if this bus malfunctioned, no instructions would be of any use.

Our little jaunt was more of a pleasure ride. Imagine a massive but rather speedy contraption that travels at the height of a couple hundred yards. A few times, I tried to reach for safety belts but found none. Admittedly, it ran very smoothly, following a set itinerary. I was even beginning to get used to this flight over the interminable city, punctuated by occasional halts.

For that reason, I very nearly missed our own stop. Luckily, Arts tugged at my sleeve, pointing at the closed doors.

As befits a yokel’s first trip to downtown, we spent a good three minutes on our feet waiting for the doors to open before the “bus” finally stopped. But at least we hadn’t missed it.

Once again Arts went over to the console and tapped a few buttons before announcing that we needed to get to the lowest level. Or, in human speak, down to earth.

Admittedly, descending felt much better than being whisked up to places unknown. Being born on Earth leaves its stamp on you. I feel much safer on terra firma than up in the air.

As we exited the elevator, our electronic assistant once again pointed the way. According to it, we were almost there: all we had to do was take the first left turn.

Which we did. I wasn't really nervous: by the end of our bus ride I'd already gotten so used to the height that my adrenalin had dropped completely.

For that reason, the temple failed to impress me. Yes, the building itself differed dramatically from regular Gatehouses. It had a tall thin spire at the center and four smaller ones at each corner, fenced off on all sides with a head-height stone wall.

It looked more like a cheap copy of a Cambodian temple. There was nothing even remotely resembling a pagoda about it. Then again, what was I thinking about? The local commoners probably saw something completely different in its place.

To my surprise, there were only two guards posted by the entrance. At least those were the only two I saw. And I wouldn't say that they looked particularly undefeatable. One was a Purg, the other a Kabirid: a ***Shadowmancer*** and a ***Poisoned Chalice*** respectively.

I very nearly reached for my railgun but decided to take a good look around first. We had loads of time. Desperate as I was to get to Anchor World ASAP, haste wouldn't do us any favors.

"Only two?" I said, relaying my thoughts to Arts.

She shrugged. "Why not? Who would want to risk breaking the law, cutting themselves off forever from a bunch of inhabited worlds? Besides, you just never know. They might not be as simple as they seem at first glance."

I gave them another once-over. Somehow I didn't think so. They looked just like regular mercs, their clothes not much better than those I got in that second-hand gear shop. The expression in their eyes were different though: brazen and cocky, as if they knew they were the law here. It actually made me uncomfortable.

As a result, we spent about an hour hovering by one of the building's corners at a respectful distance from them. I even pulled out my tiny mirror and gave the building a sneak check.

Now I could see it! A classical pagoda guarded by two Rogdean sentries in identical gray tunics. The sign in front of the building said,

Closed for extensive restauration

Funny, really. I was pretty sure that if I asked some of the locals if they'd ever set foot in this place, the answer would have been a resounding no.

Had anything changed while we'd been waiting? Outside, yes. I glimpsed the passing of occasional traffic and some Rogdean pedestrians. But not around the temple.

I always used to think that a guard's job was one of the hardest. Not because they had to sit in their sentry boxes all night, doing the rounds every hour. No, I'm talking about the kind of dudes who patrol shop premises, constantly plodding the same old beat. And this pair had enough patience to share with an average community of Players in a place like Cesspit.

Which was something you couldn't say about me. In the end, I decided we needed to battle through, and stuff the consequences.

For this reason, I pulled out my railgun and got busy discussing a plan of attack with Arts.

The problem was, I couldn't attack first. In theory, I could, of course, but then I would immediately lose my Avatar's Justice ability which had served me faithfully all this time and even saved my bacon a few times.

For that reason, Arts had to attack, leaving me to stand on the sidelines like a piece of furniture, allowing the two goons to figure out that

the guy with the wunderwaffe gun was only the escort to that awesomely aggressive lady. I just hoped they didn't have any missile launchers in their own inventories, otherwise we might end up deep in it.

I cast three Mantles on myself (making sure I still had enough mana left) and tagged on after Arts. It must have looked funny: two guys walking down a dead-end road only to stop dead right in front of the sign saying that the place was closed for restauration works.

In any case, we'd managed to arouse their interest. You couldn't blame them: they spent all day picking their respective noses, not even hoping for any action. Actually, it should be them paying us for the free show.

Arts unhurriedly reached for her album and pulled out a page. As she shook it, a small toy-like revolver dropped into her hand.

The guards' faces tensed. And once the toy gun thundered, stripping the Shadowmancer of his Mantle, they sprang into action.

Unsurprisingly, Arts took the first blow. Poisoned Chalice cast some sort of spell which showered fire and ashes onto the spot where she'd just been.

Predictably, Arts hadn't waited for them to get her in their sights and show their true colors. She took cover in full accordance with the plan we'd worked out for exactly such a scenario.

The spell singed my skin, sinking its microscopic embers into my flesh. And that's considering I was well out of their way and had even shielded myself with my prosthetic arm: and still I'd lost almost an eighth of my Health in a flash.

The main thing was, we'd managed to provoke them. Now that I'd been technically attacked by a Player, I could activate Justice.

Its hammer spun through the air, gaining momentum, and rammed into Poisoned Chalice's head. Without as much as a squeak, he was knocked back some fifteen feet, landing unconscious on the ground.

You are charged with intentionally violating the law and order of World Unit Two in the presence of witnesses. You have been outlawed! You can still improve your situation by voluntarily surrendering to the law. Otherwise, you'll face a death sentence.

Your fame has increased to 38.
Your fame has increased to 39.
Your fame has increased to 40.

You have become a hero in all the peripheral worlds. And even the residents of the Central Worlds mention your name but warily. Many people are afraid of a renegade who doesn't give a damn about laws and does exactly what he wants. Look around more frequently as you may now have a lot of detractors.

Your fame has increased to 41.
Your fame has increased to 42.

Before I could fully take in the whole bundle of messages I'd been sent, a swift shadow darted toward me, knocking me off my feet. Before I could even rewind time, I'd taken several blows.

[∞]

I can't say I was particularly impressed by what I was now seeing, but it didn't make me too happy, either. I'd been right in saying that I'd been knocked over by a shadow. Because this was exactly what happened now.

The shadow cast by the second guard suddenly got up and came at me, once again sending me sprawling to the ground. Only this time it was accompanied by a good whack on the back.

My feeble attempts to shield myself from the blows did nothing. How can you even protect yourself against a shadow? I might just as well have tried to beat the hell out of the road itself, with the same effect.

Luckily for me, the execution only lasted about three seconds — during which time the shadow split my lip and gave me an impressive black eye.

Then it just disappeared. What a bitch! It had stripped me of all my Mantles! Which, by the way, was half my available mana.

At least I was still alive.

But before I could celebrate said fact, the now-shadowless Player activated his ability again. He raised his hands as if holding something in them, then launched whatever it was at me.

You may laugh, but the shadow cast by the nearest lamppost suddenly flew at me, knocking me to the ground and depriving me of a considerable number of hitpoints. If it carried on like this, I'd soon end up flush with the ground like a molten ice-cream.

Luckily, I had Arts exactly for occasions like these. She'd already appraised the situation and seen that it had taken a turn for the worst.

Three bursts of fire thundered, followed by a couple of fireballs. Which proved to be enough for the Shadowmancer to swing round and assault the poor girl with the shadow of a nearby door.

At least this bit of a breather had done me some good. I didn't even bother to get back to my feet. I just pulled out the railgun, squinted my swollen eye and fired.

The Shadowmancer flew against the wall like a cuddly toy, showered by a few meager sparks of his remaining Mantle. Blood poured onto the

cobblestones in front of him. He must have been seriously hit. Now was a perfect moment to finish him off — but as the irony of fate would have it, just then Poisoned Chalice came round.

And he jumped straight into action, activating his signature ability.

The air filled with an emerald-tinted mist. Not too thick, so I could still see some things in it. I could see the death of the Shadowmancer as the mist enveloped him. Was Poisoned Chalice so sure they would forgive him for killing his comrade in exchange for bringing in two wanted criminals? Or was it his head playing up? After all, he'd been stripped of 90% hitpoints.

Whatever the reason, he ignored the Shadowmancer's death entirely. So much for the proverbial corporate spirit! And I couldn't even ask because he was already advancing toward me like a battering ram, surrounded by that emerald mist of his.

How I could see that, might you ask? I didn't. I was about to attack and even drew my Katzbalger, readying to strike — but out of pure self-preservation instinct, I stuck my prosthetic hand in front of myself. The fake skin shriveled, peeling off the steel prosthetic in tatters, while I recoiled and started backing off.

What did I have to offer against it? My railgun was still on cooldown, and there was no way I could get close enough to attack him with a sword blow.

The problem was, I couldn't back off forever. After a few seconds, my back hit the stone wall of the opposite house. How I wished for an elderly Rogdean lady to stick her head out of the window and shout, "Stop this nonsense, I'm calling the police!" Still, this particular area of the gigantesque megalopolis seemed to have been abandoned...

That's when Arts interfered once again. All this time, she'd been peppering Poisoned Chalice with fireballs — but he must have been either

immune to or well-protected against fire spells because he ignored her entirely. I couldn't really tell in this mist.

That's when Arts launched a suicidal attack. With the kind of guttural scream more befitting to a savage Amazon than a civilized lady, she grabbed her sword and assaulted the guard.

Immediately, something changed. The mist began to shrink back as if unfolding for a new attack.

Then Arts screamed.

My heart clenched. Unthinkingly I dashed forward in an equally suicidal impulse, pouncing into the toxic mist.

Immediately my breathing became labored. My mouth tasted foul; my skin erupted in blisters. But still it wasn't as bad as what had just happened to my prosthetic arm. Could the mist have become less potent? Or could Poisoned Chalice control its power, meaning he'd just spent most of its energy on attacking Arts?

The thoughts flashed through my head like shooting stars. I hadn't paused for a second. Like a wind I darted through the mist and took a hearty swing with my Katzbalger, investing all of my strength into a slashing blow against the guard's neck.

Predictably, I hadn't dealt him any damage, only stripped him of his remaining Mantle. But at least I'd managed to topple him over, and with that, the toxic mist began to disperse too.

I can't remember now how exactly I ended up on top of him, pummeling him in the best traditions of Mohammed Ali. I didn't even stop when my fists had finally ripped his last Mantle apart, connecting with his face.

Take that! I didn’t stop until he finally stopped convulsing. Only then did I climb to my feet, pick up my Katzbalger and finish him off.

You’ve killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: Poisoned Chalice. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.

You’ve gained the Tactician skill.

You’ve gained the Shock spell.

By now, I admittedly didn’t even want to know what kinds of spells and abilities I could get. I’d stopped checking them a long time ago. I just wasn’t interested in becoming stronger anymore. What did interest me now was Arts who lay prostrated on the ground, looking much the worse for wear.

Her hand — her sword hand, apparently — had been reduced to a shapeless lump of flesh dunked in acid. Her face and the rest of her skin were covered in blisters much bigger than mine. She was groaning and grinding her teeth, unable to open her teary eyes.

And just as I looked at her, the street erupted in a cacophony of activity.

No idea how those two guards had managed to send word of our attack to their buddies. The latter might have simply heard the commotion and all the firing — but that was irrelevant because the shadow of an approaching hovercraft was already hanging over me.

I heard voices resounding from the same direction as we’d just come. Soon it was going to get pretty hot here.

I picked up Arts as gently as I could and ran toward the Temple. The shouting was already very close. I tripped over the stone steps and very nearly went head over heels but somehow managed to storm inside.

Then I saw them.

The Gatekeepers.

There were three of them. Two of them didn't differ much from those I'd seen in other worlds. But the one in the middle was clearly the main man. In his gilded armor and long flowing cloak, he stood at least half a head taller than his brethren. Some kind of mutant, apparently. He must have been raised on those hormone-pumped outsize spring chickens.

Still, I only gave a fleeting glance to the majestic trio. As soon as we were safely under the Gatekeepers' protection, I laid Arts on the floor, holding up her head, and reached for my Moon steel dagger.

"Listen up, Player—" the one in the gilded armor began.

I wasn't listening. I reached into my inventory for the mandrake root that my great-great-grandpappy had given me, and took a slice off it.

Juice splattered all around as if the plant had been waiting to be used. I tried to pour it evenly over Arts' arm, watching with relief as her skin began to recover. At least she stopped groaning and opened her eyes, curiously watching my manipulations.

Arts, Arts. Did you really think that I'd let you die?

Having finished with her arm, I started dripping the juice over her face, rubbing it into the skin. Arts winced but didn't protest, apparently realizing that my makeshift *Serge's Campside Spa and Beauty Parlor* was now working hard on reconstituting her original looks.

I was almost happy with the result. Although her skin looked red and scalded, it didn't appear particularly damaged. Arts too seemed to be much better overall.

As for me, my entire body was itching. My Health bar kept shrinking — slowly but surely.

Dammit! I didn’t have enough juice left for myself.

“Player, you’ll have to come with us,” one of our attackers announced as he appeared in the doorway.

“Yeah right. So that you can kill me?” I said, stashing the dagger out of harm’s way while getting back to my feet.

Outside, it was getting crowded. I had no illusions whatsoever about the situation. They wouldn’t let me take more than a couple of steps. No wonder I’d received so much Fame for just attacking the guard. Things like this didn’t happen very often around here. They were quite prepared to tear me to shreds with their bare hands.

“No,” the Player said through clenched teeth. “You don’t understand!”

He walked over to me and laid his hand on my shoulder.

Which he really shouldn’t have done.

I didn’t even notice when one of the Gatekeepers materialized right behind me. Not the main honcho but one of his two assistants.

He didn’t have much to say for such a smart and handsome individual. He just gave the other Player the slightest of shoves, sending him flying down the Temple steps like a cork out of a champagne bottle.

Well, what did the idiot expect, kicking off in a holy place like this?

“Are you okay?” I asked Arts.

“Getting better and happier with every passing day,” she paused, then gave me a serious but somewhat wary look. “Go on, I’ll wait for you here. Only...”

“Only what?”

“Do come back.”

“That I can guarantee. After all the pandemonium we’ve created here? Just please stay put,” I added jokingly.

“Sure. I’ll just pop down to the shop to get some pretzels. Come on, be off with you!”

I walked over to the Gatekeepers and addressed the tallest one:

“Good afternoon, Sir. Could you please tell me how I could get to Anchor World?”

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Chapter 23

DÉJÀ VU IS A FUNNY THING. Who could explain, for instance, how we can navigate the winding old streets in a totally unfamiliar city with any confidence? Or feel instant affinity to someone we've just met for the first time?

What is it, actually? Some peculiar mental state — or could those reincarnation experts be actually right in saying that this isn't our first stretch on planet Earth?

I don't have a ready answer for this. I'm probably not even smart enough to ponder such lofty notions. And now, too, I just accepted it for a fact: this Anchor World felt so warm and accommodating as if I'd known it for all eternity.

As soon as I'd stepped out of the Gatehouse, I took a good look around. Everywhere I turned, all I could see were dark brown sand dunes. Sand, I repeat. Not dust. To my right, I could make out black mountains in the distance. In front of me lay a road of broken stones just as coarse as everything else around. Had it not been for this clear indicator of my route, I wouldn't have even known where to go.

A castle towered up ahead. At first glance, it appeared to be a fair way away which meant that getting there would take a long time. Still, I had no other options. Doubtful they had sightseeing buses here. And despite the proximity of hi-tech Central Worlds, I didn't think I could count on an accidental airbike appearing on the horizon.

I cast a glance at the heavy clouds, so dark that they appeared to be pregnant with dust. They hovered so low they completely blocked out the sun, making any air travel not the best of ideas.

But now that I'd crossed into this world, I noticed another curious detail. My Health bar which had already shrunk by a half had suddenly frozen. Aha. Did this mean that portal travel could level out any previous negative effects? Or was it something peculiar to Anchor World alone?

Who the hell knows? Whatever the case, I was perfectly happy with it.

In less than two minutes, I sneezed half a dozen times. The place smelled of dust. No, correction: the local air was completely saturated with it. It's a bit like going on a tour of a chocolate factory. You may sincerely love the smell of chocolates but once you find yourself next to the actual vat, you should feel yourself lucky that you don't throw up on the spot. Now, too, I got the feeling that someone had stuck two cinnamon sticks up my nose and set fire to them.

Still, I was alive. I could breathe and walk without sensing any other negative effects from the local air — so far at least. It was quite possible that after an extended exposure, Players might start growing tails and feathers, but I had no intention of staying in this Gatekeepers' world for that long. All I needed to do was find a charger for my artifact and come right on back.

Still, before I could even cover half of my journey, I sensed an unpleasant prickle in my chest. And no, it wasn't a precursor to a heart attack.

It was just my Intuition.

I froze, half-crouching in the middle of the road, as if trying to shrink. Warily I turned my head. No one.

What had it been, then?

After a couple a minutes, I got the impression that I could make out a few dots moving in the distance. There was no way I could make out any more detail. Still, the anxiety in my chest grew ever stronger.

I ducked, just in case; then after some deliberation I slid off the road into the sand and tried to bury myself in it like you do at the seaside. If you didn't look too closely, you wouldn't even see me.

No idea how long I stayed there. Judging by my body clock, it was quite a while. Finally, I heard the sound of footsteps and strange noises as if someone was being dragged over the sand. After a while, I could make out voices which sounded closer and clearer with every minute.

"Because you don't work your whole life here until you retire, you dickhead," a man's hoarse voice quipped. "Once you've made a few trips, you get the hell outta here. But you had to rope your brother into it, too!"

"This must be why you've come here for the sixth time," a young man's high-pitched voice replied. "You just can't get enough of it, can you? Just like a fly can't get enough turds."

The hoarse one cussed but didn't reply.

They were just walking past me. I froze, afraid of betraying my presence. I had a funny feeling that in a world of Gatekeepers, regular Players had better keep their distance from their peers.

I had my ideas, of course, about what they might be doing here. They must have been dust collectors working for the Players who'd shut the Temple down. I wouldn't be surprised if they had their entire world — or at least a part of it — in their pocket.

"You think he might still come round?" the young man asked.

“If he doesn’t croak within the next twenty-four hours, he might. But he’ll never be the same again. I’ve seen my fair share of dust robbers: almost all of them become junks. And the more they work, the more dust they need.”

“Well, I didn’t know, did I?”

As they distanced themselves from me, the wind covered their words.

I waited some more, then crawled out of my hiding place. Now I could see three men walking toward the Gatehouse. Or rather, two were walking, carrying the third one who seemed to be unconscious. He should thank his lucky star that his brother was with him, otherwise they would have already dumped him.

Did that mean that you could actually OD on dust? Very interesting.

I openly continued on my journey, studying the surrounding scenery and pondering what had just happened. So if you had the right Reputation, the local Gatekeepers would let you in without further ado. Why? — Good question. Somehow I didn’t think that Gatekeepers would do that out of the goodness of their hearts. Every action should be remunerated. And they didn’t simply just let Players in but allowed them to pilfer dust. It just didn’t sum up.

Thus deliberating, I finally reached the castle — or should I say, I approached it until I could see it in plain sight.

Calling it a castle was a bit of an overstatement: it was more of a walled town or a fortress of sorts, with a huge keep whose tall thin tower seemed to transpierce the sky. Smaller and humbler buildings radiated from it, the whole structure being enclosed by a stone wall set off by a fat tower on each corner. The wall space between them was punctuated by yet smaller ones. Doubtful they made sense in terms of fortifications, simply because all the towers were level with the wall. They probably served as

Gatekeepers' hangouts where they could sunbathe or should I say cloudbathe, judging by the lamentable UV-ray levels in this world.

The fortress was marginally darker than the sand that surrounded it, allowing it to slightly stand out from the local countryside. But as I walked here, I noticed some visibly lighter spots amid the dunes. They were plagued by dust devils so that the earth on those spots appeared to shift.

Ignoring the peculiarities of the local landscape, I headed for the gate.

No one seemed to give a damn about security here. No moat, no raised bridge, not even guards on duty. Anyone could come and take what they wanted.

After a while, I noticed a Gatekeeper sauntering along the wall. I immediately noticed a very curious thing about him. All the Gatekeepers I'd seen previously had been clad in full armor. But not this one. He was dressed in simple flowing clothes. He didn't even have a helmet on! The first Gatekeeper in my life whose face was clearly visible.

Having said that, I couldn't actually see it. Because as soon as he noticed me, he turned away and started walking back. A bit like a celebrity afraid of being recognized.

But now I knew that they actually resembled human beings. Sort of. In a humanoid kind of way. At least he had hair, I was pretty sure of that.

Thus musing, I walked through the gate which was a simple gateway without any grill or portcullis. What was the point of having it at all?

Here, I finally got stopped.

A tall Gatekeeper stood between me and the donjon, blocking the way. His armor glinted silver. He studied me for all of two seconds, then asked in a rather courteous manner,

“What brings you to our world, Player?”

“A dire necessity,” I said. “I need to charge this,” I reached out for the stone tablet made from the merging of the four Divine Stones and showed it to him.

He reached out his hand, then promptly snatched it back as if he were a vampire offered a bunch of garlic. He fell silent for a good ten seconds, making me wonder whether I’d started this conversation off on the wrong foot. Should I have begun by chatting about the latest football match or ask his advice on Gatekeeper cuisine?

Finally, he replied,

“Admittedly, it’s not very often we see this kind of thing in a Player’s possession. Definitely not in such a depleted state. Please follow me. I need to confer with one of the Elder Brothers.”

Yeah yeah. Go ahead, ask Big Brother.

Still, I didn’t say anything. With a nod, I obediently trailed after him.

It felt strange. I always thought that Gatekeepers would be some sort of demigods not of this world. But now as I watched them in their natural habitat, I could see they were perfectly normal. They might not be creatures of flesh and blood (because I still distinctly remembered one of them being wounded back in Purgator), but they still had the same daily tasks and worries.

It was a bit like meeting your childhood idol in the flesh. You suddenly realize he’s just a human being like any other.

Having said that, I was quite curious. Their lifestyle was actually rather Spartan. No socks and boxers drying on washing lines; no idle dudes nursing their beers on garden benches. No garden benches here, either. So

how did they go about their business in the evenings, identifying dust addicts and the other society misfits?

The buildings were austere too, as if hewn out of a giant cliff and transported here by the Original God himself.

The closer we got to the donjon, the busier the place became. These Gatekeepers were different. An awesome bunch they were, clad in full armor and apparently waiting for something to happen. Not at all like that lazy bastard in his underpants by the castle gate. These dudes really meant business.

They did appear expectant, all their eyes focused on the donjon. Had they had wrist watches, they'd be constantly consulting them. Still, whoever they were awaiting didn't seem in a hurry to arrive. Must have been some local bigwig about to make his appearance.

Their reaction to our arrival could be best described as a brouhaha in a funeral parlor. Everybody turned their heads in our direction but still nobody made a sound. Their discipline seemed to be even stricter than the army's. Good job I hadn't been born a Gatekeeper. Thanks, Mom and Dad!

Before we could get any closer to the massive doors of the donjon, they swung wide open, revealing yet another Gatekeeper. He was bigger and taller than all the others; his armor, even despite the poor light, gleamed with gold — or whatever it was supposed to be.

"What is it, Brother?" the golden giant said with whatever modicum of surprise a Gatekeeper could muster, which wasn't very much.

"Excuse me, Elder Brother," my escort spoke. "I'm afraid I've got a delicate situation on my hands. This Player has just approached us with a rather bizarre request regarding an equally bizarre item. Or should I say, the item is nothing special — but it shouldn't be in a Player's possession to begin with."

“Don’t worry about it, Brother,” the golden one motioned him to stop, even though I could have sworn there hadn’t been a trace of worry in my escort’s voice. Then he turned to me,

“What kind of item is it?”

I shrugged. “Just an artifact,” I said, producing the stone tablet.

“Oh. How did you get hold of this?”

“I wish I knew where to begin, sir!”

Still, I was obliged to tell him the whole story, seeing as a good thirty Gatekeepers were now staring expectantly at me. It would have been stupid to say something like, “Sorry, some other time”. And trying to lie would have been even stupider. After all, these were the guys who were about to decide whether I could recharge the artifact or not.

So I started blabbing, telling them everything from the start. My first visit to Purgator and how I’d discovered Arthall, the first stone, in the Rachnaids’ lair. How I’d located the second one in the catacombs of Paris. How I’d stolen the remaining two, which was why I was now persona non grata in both Mechilos and Elysium...

Having finished, I licked my parched lips and gave the gold dude a long look.

“The reason my Brother is so undecided is because you’re the first Player who’s laid his hands on a Gatekeeper’s Heart without killing him first,” he said. “Because this item in your hands is all that’s left of one of our Brothers.”

“Can Players kill Gatekeepers?”

“It’s extremely rare. Very few are capable of this. They’re normally known as either gods or demigods. They need to be sufficiently powerful as

well as extremely stupid to try it on with us. And their end is predictably lamentable. May I?" he said, offering his outstretched hand.

Without saying a word, I allowed him to touch the artifact.

He nodded. "That's right. The Heart's owner, our Brother, was killed a long time ago. Not by one Player, but by several. They were smart, too. They knew very well they couldn't control a Gatekeeper's Heart, so they shared it between them, dividing it into four parts. That's how the fragments started their journey across the worlds, changing hands until finally they ended up with you."

He fell silent as if searching for words. In the meantime, I was greedily soaking up everything he was saying.

So I was holding a Gatekeeper's heart. Which probably harbored their teleportation secret. Talking about which...

"I need to charge it up," I said, "and locate a teleportation stone, like those you have in all Gatehouses."

"The teleportation stone is called an altar. And you don't need one. It's only for when a Gatekeeper needs to transport somebody else. If you only want to transport yourself, the Heart's good enough."

Once again he fell silent, casting me a long studying glance. Finally, he said something I least expected,

"You're not a Gatekeeper. Your shell is fragile. When fully charged, a Heart can destroy you in a very short time. It will wipe out your identity, making you dependent on whatever it was imbibed with."

I shuddered, remembering the junkie I'd seen earlier on being dragged out of here. I also remembered the dust druggies I'd seen in Atrain, completely degenerated, whose existence was focused on one thing alone: how to get more dust. I wouldn't wish it on anyone, least of all on myself.

Still, I couldn’t back off now. It had gone far too far.

“I intend to get rid of it as soon as I get to Archaeth . I need to see the Choruls.”

“You want to get to their closed world?” his voice betrayed surprise for a change. “You really want to become one of them?”

“Can you really do that?”

“Yes, it can be done,” the gold dude replied. “At least now I’m not surprised that it was you that managed to collect the Heart. You see, Brothers, how it actually works,” he said, turning to all the others. “We spend too much time trying to get ready for the upcoming war. So much time in fact that we completely forgot about the Players. And this was our big mistake. As for you,” his helmet swayed, and I thought I glimpsed two magical yellow lights glint within the narrow slit of his visor, “you may charge your Heart up, provided the dust doesn’t kill you. Take him to a Pit, Brother. To the deepest one.”

I can’t speak for a Gatekeeper’s Heart, but my own began to pound as if I’d just run a mile. What did he mean, if the dust didn’t kill me? I’d just checked my diary and saw no deaths scheduled there for the next week.

The way I’d envisioned it, I’d just give the Heart to one of the Gatekeepers who would go and charge it up for me (because apparently my smartphone charger was too weak for the task). After that, I’d know exactly what to do.

“Listen, man,” I asked my escort as we walked toward the Deepest Pit, “what did he mean by saying ‘if dust didn’t kill me’?”

By then, we’d already vacated the donjon square but hadn’t yet left the city. For some reason, I felt a strange affinity with their boss, so I was

quite comfortable showering my escort with questions. He must have felt something similar because he replied without playing too hard to get,

“Dust is what empowers all Players. It allows you to create spells and study new skills. It also allows you to build amazing artefacts. Roughly speaking, all of us were born of the dust.”

“Awesome, man. But what about the killing part?”

“The only creatures completely immune to the dust are Gatekeepers. We can use fresh dust as we see fit and not worry about the consequences. But Players’ bodies are all different. Some are more sensitive to it than others.”

“And what’s that Pit we’re going to?”

“It’s where the dust comes from. The deeper a Pit, the more dust it produces,” he replied as we walked out of the castle gates. “And the more harmful it is for a Player. Still, Elder Brother allowed you to go there. It takes a really deep Pit to restart a Heart.”

“How far is it?”

“Not far at all. We’ll be there before you even notice. Are you ready?”

Was it my imagination or his last words rang with menace?

No, I wasn’t ready. I didn’t look forward to either dying or becoming a dust addict, to name just a few side effects of my curious nature.

My heart was rent with doubt. Fear clogged my throat, forcing me to constantly clear it.

Still, I said with a halting confidence,

“Yes, I’m ready. Take me there.”

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Chapter 24

EVERY MAN HAS A CERTAIN initiation period which puts an end to his boyhood and transforms him into an adult: someone who's responsible both for his own actions and for the fates of his loved ones, who learns to deal with his mistakes and their consequences, eradicates immaturity and embraces social life.

In the old days, it used to be simple. A prehistoric boychild was supposed to become a hunter as soon as he reached a certain age. To mark his transformation, he was subjected to all kinds of trials, some of which could be truly horrendous for a mere teenager. He'd have to spend the night standing atop a tall pole, or run along a buffalo's back, or bravely withstand the bites of wild ants, and so on, and so forth. As the tribal system gave way to slave-owning and later feudal societies, the once-hunter had become a warrior, bathed in the glory of a virtuous champion.

Still, humanity didn't stop there. Over time, strong muscles became less synonymous with power. These days, the high and mighty tend to be balding and overweight. And as for the initiation ritual, it has become a rare treat reserved for some die-hard arcane religions.

Take me, for instance. I've never been a warrior. Never served in the army. Never been responsible for any loved ones other than myself, and I've done a pretty botched job of it. I'd never even given it much thought before the Game came into my life. There'd been no initiation ritual worth speaking of. I just went with the flow, unsinkable like a freshly-laid turd.

And finally, this was my big initiation moment.

According to my escort, we were all born of the dust, and we would all revert back to it once we died. Although I had certain questions regarding this statement, trying to debate with him right now wasn't the best idea as we waded through ankle-deep sand, leaving the castle behind. I should consider myself lucky he turned out to be quite a talker.

"So why would you let Players in here at all?"

"Because there's honey and then there're bees. Is it what you call those funny insects in your world?"

I nodded. "Exactly. But still I don't understand you."

"Understanding takes a while. Also, it comes when the time is just right. That's a very old wisdom."

"And what is that Pit?"

"It's just a place where dust appears."

"What do you mean, *appears?* Like, out of thin air?"

"Sorry for not making myself clear. It's a place which fills with dust. The deeper a Pit, the more dust it accumulates."

"Oh great," I mumbled.

I also kept wondering how he could find his way around here. The whole place was just as the song goes: "out where hot sands are blowing, out where the dunes are growing". The day was grim; the sky had put on its dark curly wig of thunderclouds. Sand rustled underfoot.

What a strange feeling. I kinda sensed that this world was safe — but still I had a rather bad feeling about it. Having said that, had there ever been a single world that I'd liked, other than Cesspit? Exactly. Home is where

your heart is. And sometimes you can't quite so easily have a change of heart.

"Almost there," my escort said. "Can you smell it?"

I could. The air was filled with a sickly sweet scent: a cinnamon bun served with cinnamon sauce sprinkled with cinnamon.

I sensed a lump in my throat — but luckily, I didn't throw up. You can't throw up very easily on an empty stomach — and by now, I'd already forgotten when I'd last eaten. My shrinking stomach was probably thinking my throat had been cut, so it must have taken offence and stopped sending signals to my brain altogether.

"Keep going," the Gatekeeper said. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

"I'm not afraid," I lied — either to him or to myself, I wasn't really sure. "You only die once."

"That's an interesting notion," he said with a chuckle. "I haven't been around for that long, which is probably why I find everything that Players say quite insightful."

"Well, I'm not too advanced in age, either, but honestly, I believe most Players to be absolute and utter assholes. Sorry."

"You're looking at it from a different prospective," the Gatekeeper said.

Finally, we stopped next to what looked like a shell crater about fifty feet in diameter.

It was indeed filled to the brim with dust — only this dust was different, not like the kind I was used to. It was brighter and spongier like beach sand softened by a shower of rain. It was much more concentrated compared to the stuff that Players used for money.

“What am I supposed to do?” I asked. “Should I just lay the Heart on the dust and wait for it to charge up?”

“I’m afraid it’s not so simple as that,” the Gatekeeper replied. “A Heart is an empty vessel which needs to be topped up. But at the same time, a Heart is an artifact bound to its master who is the only person that can control it: charging it up, using its energy to create as well as destroy, and even opening new passages to other worlds. If you want this Heart to accept you as its master, you need to become a medium between it and the dust.”

“Now please say the same in layman’s terms.”

“You must enter the Pit with it, so that it can fill itself up with dust via you.”

“Isn’t there some other way out of this?”

“If you wish. It’s over there,” he said, pointing in the general direction I’d come from.

What a bastard! Was he putting me on? Never mind. Let’s see how it’s supposed to work.

My hand shook as I fished the stone tablet out of the inventory. This was the moment of truth. It was either make or break.

The Heart showed no signs of life. Just a fire-licked chunk of rock.

Never mind. Let’s do it.

I took a step forward and immediately sank ankle-deep into the dust.

Was it my imagination or was this substance actually alive? It felt as if someone had grabbed me by the foot and showed no intention of letting

go. It felt like I was wading through hardening concrete, not through a pile of wet sand.

My next step was an even harder struggle. I sank to my knees, my muscles bound solid. My neck seized; my back between the shoulder blades felt as if it had been hit by a crowbar.

A stifled yelp escaped my chest as something pressed its entire weight against me but still allowed me to move.

Once the dust had reached my waist, my vision darkened, the already-dim world reduced to a blur, as if I'd been staring at the sun for a long time, then pressed my eyelids. My body wasn't my own. It didn't listen to me, stiff like a piece of driftwood hardened by wind and brine.

But unfortunately, all my senses still worked.

I could feel a strange kind of power forcing its way from under my feet toward my outstretched hand clenching the Heart. An unbearable pain ran through every cell of my body, ever growing, as if I were a huge alkaline battery trying to discharge alternating current. My muscles tensed; my veins throbbed; every tendon in me stretched to its limits.

I really couldn't understand what was still keeping me in this world. Why wasn't I already dead, smashed to smithereens, Heart and all?

Interestingly, after a few excruciatingly long seconds of agony I could see again — but not with my eyes, strangely enough. All around me, a great many voices pulsated with power, their threads cocooning me, radiating away from me in a variety of strands, some of them thin, other thick. They glowed white, pink, orange, blue, painting every square inch of the surrounding space a multitude of colors.

But even this strange supernatural vision wouldn't let me see the Heart. By now, it was so saturated with dust that it blinded me, forcing me

to avert my mental gaze. And still it was insatiable like a bottomless pit that I was trying in vain to fill up.

I heard the Gatekeeper shout something to me. Was it my imagination or this imperturbable Anchor dweller was now actually alarmed?

Then I sensed it, too. Something must have gone wrong. I couldn't stay here any longer. The Heart was getting ever heavier, threatening to drag me down to the very bottom of this great Pit.

Still, apparently, I couldn't stop it quite so easily. After a long period of inactivity, the Heart had finally got the taste for real power and was now craving it like a blind calf clings to its mother's udder.

I couldn't serve as its medium for much longer though. By now, my body had been reduced to a screaming lump of agonizing flesh. I couldn't even tell whether it was me screaming or just my fevered mind.

I couldn't die just like that. Not after the long journey I'd already made. I had no right to die. Not after all these trials and sacrifices. I had to survive. I needed to get all the answers.

For Hunter's sake! For Traug! For Arts! For all the dead and those still alive! I was obliged to make it!

With tremendous effort and a lot of willpower, I forced the Heart to stop charging and opened my eyes.

Remarkably, everything around became considerably lighter, as if the thunderclouds had finally parted, permitting the sunrays to penetrate the Pit. But that wasn't the case: the sky was still safely covered by a thick haze concealing it from prying eyes.

Although the Heart in my hand wasn't beating, the vibes it exuded were so powerful they seemed to distort the very fabric of reality around me. It was a bit like looking at the air ripple over a bonfire.

The artifact rested in my hand, omnipotent, just as the Gatekeeper had described it. It could channel its own energy in order to either create or destroy. It could open new portals to other worlds. Well-nourished and ready for action.

Oh well. Very soon we'd see how it works.

I struggled to put the fully charged Heart back into my inventory. It reminded me of my prom night and how we'd tried to smuggle two large vodka bottles to the event in my jeans pockets. It had been a similar struggle: the bottles fought a desperate battle against me, adamant not to let me stuff them in. In the end, it had taken all of my non-existent yoga practice, breathing all the air out of my lungs.

Similarly, the Heart just wouldn't fit into my inventory. Still, I couldn't offer it anything better. As it was, my hand had already turned dark as if I'd grabbed at a high-voltage cable.

I clenched my fingers, making a fist, then relaxed them. It hurt a lot. Then again, what didn't? My entire body was wailing in agony, begging for mercy.

I'd long exhausted the last of my strength. I had neither motivation nor willpower left. If I got out at all, it was only thanks to my asinine determination.

My every step reverberated with paroxysms of pain. I lost all feeling of movement. Still, very gradually, I began to emerge from the Pit.

Reluctantly the mass of dust was releasing me. I gave up walking and desperately crawled toward the Gatekeeper until finally I was so close to him that he scooped me up and carried me out of there.

Despite his full armor and his closed helmet, I got the impression I could see right through him. This wasn't a powerful titan opening gateways

to other worlds but just a scared little boy.

“It took you a long time,” his voice indeed rang with anxiety. “I even thought the Pit might actually swallow you.”

“Why, did it happen before?” I asked, unable to recognize my own voice. It sounded like sand being rubbed into glass with a damp washcloth.

“Not every Player comes back from the Pit, oh no. I can’t even tell you how it works. It could depend on his or her inner motives. Or willpower. How are you now, anyway?”

“Could have been better.”

It was true. My right leg was irresponsive. My left one kept spasming. My prosthetic arm still worked, but only because it didn’t have any muscles.

My heart behaved sort of funny too. It would palpitate, them stop beating altogether for a few seconds.

“You need some time,” the Gatekeeper said, laying me on the sand.

He was right. No idea how long I’d been lying there staring at the low clouds floating past, but eventually, the sharp pain subsided. My limbs stopped spasming, although their muscles remained feeble as if I’d been pumping iron all day.

At a certain point, I could prop myself up with my elbows, and after a few more seconds, I finally scrambled to my feet and took a few staggering steps.

My depleted body seemed to gradually perk up. I stretched, flexing my joints. I felt strange: a mixture of fatigue and a bizarre, completely unfounded self-confidence. The latter scared me a little. But before I could voice my reservations, the Gatekeeper confirmed them:

“You’ve spent too much time in the Pit. That’s because you’re too inexperienced. You didn’t know. Now, both the Heart and your own body are overcharged. You need to find a way to get rid of the excessive energy.”

“But how can I do that?”

“Use the Heart. You wanted to go see the Choruls, didn’t you? Now is the perfect time to do that. Do you know the name of their world?”

“It’s Archaeth.”

“Think about it. Try to tune to its vibe. Try to imagine those you want to speak with. Once you’ve done that, just activate the Heart.”

“I will, I promise. I just need to collect a friend. Thank you, er, Gatekeeper. Sorry, I don’t know your name.”

“Here, names are only for novices. We are Brothers to each other. You Players call us Gatekeepers. So your form of address is perfectly correct. I’m happy I managed to help you. Hope to see you again.”

I wasn’t so sure. Still, I proffered my hand. He stared at it, hesitating, then squeezed it as gently as he could, apparently afraid of breaking something inside. The cold touch of his gauntlet was refreshing like a roll in the snow after a steaming-hot sauna.

Still, I had to be on my way. I had no idea how much time had elapsed. I needed to rescue Arts ASAP.

I decided to take a shortcut across the dunes. Even here, my map was apparently working. A brief hike across an unfamiliar stretch of wilderness didn’t seem to present any problems.

With every passing minute, I felt better. Walking got my blood going. The strong wind tousled my hair and tugged at my trench coat, urging me

on instead of discouraging me. There was so much energy coursing my veins that at some point, I just couldn't help myself: I broke into a run.

Faster, faster, faster! I bolted like someone being chased by a monster. My own body felt just too slow and cumbersome.

Finally, I glimpsed a small rock in the distance, half-buried in the sand.

I pulled out the Heart and on instinct activated *Incremental Apparition.*

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 17.
You've created the Continental Apparition spell!
Your Creation skill has increased to level 6.

To say I was amazed would be an understatement. I could now see the road I'd taken earlier, the one leading to the Gatekeepers' fortress. What I couldn't see though was the rock to which I'd just teleported myself.

I turned round, peering at the sand, until finally I saw it, left far behind.

Wait a sec. I thought *Incremental Apparition* could only teleport me to a point within my field of vision? Had I just received a new spell?

Continental Apparition (Mysticism). Allows you to teleport within the confines of any given continent. Warning: you must have previously visited your destination point.
Cost of use: 3000 mana points

My breathing seized. *How much?* How were you even supposed to amass such amounts of mana? You would have to level up forever, which was probably why I'd never encountered anything like it before.

But most importantly, I didn’t have so much mana to begin with! And my mana bar was still completely full, long restored after that little scrap by the Temple. Its blue strip hadn’t even budged.

The Heart!

The artifact in my hand was still the same — but now I could see with my newly-gained second vision that it was throbbing, pulsating, transferring its mysterious powers to me.

I squeezed it hard in my hand, closed my eyes and tried to visualize the Gatehouse of Anchor World. When I opened my eyes again, I saw a new message in my interface,

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 18.

It worked!

I was standing in the Gatehouse facing the Gatekeeper.

I wish I could say he looked surprised but his face was concealed by the closed helmet. Never mind. Let’s imagine a grimace of amazement on his face. The only problem was, his voice wasn’t particularly friendly when he spoke, pointing at the Heart,

“Put that away.”

While not exactly threatening, he sounded almost scared. He definitely didn’t appreciate seeing humble Players walking around here with precious artifacts in their hands.

So I obeyed. Then I walked over to him, seeing as I didn’t need to pay for the trip here and back. Which was some consolation gleaned from my reputation with the Gatekeepers, considering my current financial predicament.

I gave him the name of the world and the Gatehouse’s location.

The teleport was so quick I didn’t even get the chance to get dizzy. I looked around and blew a sigh of relief.

Here, nothing had changed. Arts was still sitting by the wall in the same position, busy bandaging her hand. She must have applied some ointment or whatever. The three Gatekeepers were still standing watch over her — and apparently also over the altar and the Temple itself, as I was about to find out.

Outside, the street was still buzzing with Players’ indignant voices, albeit not as loud. It would have been stupid to think they would have left. They knew we had nowhere else to go.

“Serge!” Arts exclaimed, jumping to her feet. Or rather, scrambling up very clumsily. She rushed toward me, then stopped, not daring to touch me as if I was a piece of uranium-235 about to fission.

“Arts, you okay?”

“Fine. You?”

“You won’t believe it. Never felt better. I did it. Here,” I reached into my inventory, about to produce the artifact.

“Player! The right to use a Heart inside a Gatehouse is reserved for Gatekeepers alone,” the giant in the shiny armor informed me of this yet-unknown rule. “Put it away, or we’ll be obliged to—”

I hurried to return the artifact to my inventory. Okay, okay. I wasn’t stupid. A bit jumpy, are we?

“So how can we do it?” Arts asked anxiously. “I can’t go to Anchor. And if we go out—”

“They can’t do anything,” I said. “Let’s go. They won’t touch us. I promise.”

“You sure you’re okay?” Arts repeated without taking her eyes off me.

“I’m sure I’m sure. Why?”

“It’s your eyes. They’re glowing...”

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Chapter 25

WHAT MAKES A MOUSE run away from a cat? What makes a shoal of fish flee a killer whale? Why does a dove try to escape a buzzard? The answer is simple. That's how life works. There's always a victim and a hunter chasing after it. Both in the animal world and in the human one.

The question is, what's gonna happen if the system malfunctions? Take a hen, for instance, trying to protect its chicks from a diving hawk. Or a group of baby penguins trying to defend a less lucky one from a seal. In other words, as soon as the victim defies its Darwin-defined place in the food chain, it stands a high chance of confusing the predator. Because predators aren't used to resistance. Their job is to chase and kill. They don't know any different.

Which must have been why the Players crowding outside met our arrival with a deathly silence. Simply because we didn't come out with our hands in the air, casting pleading glances at those who were stronger than us. We didn't blab, begging for a few more minutes of life. We didn't count on their mercy and were fully prepared to fight.

Of course I could try to use the Heart to teleport us somewhere as soon as we stepped outside. Still, I wasn't yet sure how much time the said teleportation might take. Would I need to "warm it up" first or would it work instantly? Would the Players open fire on us as soon as we tumbled out of the Gatehouse — or would they let us get the hell out of their world?

Too many "ifs", if you ask me, and to put it mildly, I didn't like any of them very much.

Plus there was another important thing which I found quite hard to explain. I felt like I could take on any old opponent right now. And this wasn’t arrogance. I just knew it.

It wasn’t even about that glow in my eyes that Arts had already likened to searchlights. It actually looked as if I too got “charged up” in the Pit, not just the Heart. It was a good job it was only my eyes that were glowing, if you know what I mean.

The thing was, I really needed to burn up all that excess energy — or force, whatever. And the means to achieve these ends were standing right here, in the shape of twenty-odd Players.

So they wavered. Not yet contemplating escape but noticeably hesitant. Their victim which was supposed to flee and which they were supposed to corner walked out with his head held high.

Or it could be, of course, that they were alarmed by the color of my eyes — which were now fiery golden, if Arts were to be believed — as well as the gleaming Heart in my hand. Personally, I didn’t care any longer.

As for Arts, I told her to stay in the Gatehouse, to keep an eye on the scene without interfering. I was the invulnerable one here. And I fully intended to stay like that for as long as possible, thanks to a good hundred Mantles and Veils which I’d promptly cast on myself with the Heart’s help.

Actually, this Gatekeepers’ gismo seemed to be very useful in every respect. I’m surprised I’d managed to get along without it until now.

“Hey you!” shouted the Player nearest to me.

He was probably about to add something like, ‘Raise your hands in the air, put that thing down slowly and kick it toward us’. Still, I had no intention of either negotiating or playing mind games with them.

I simply activated the Heart and started to oppress them.

Your Mysticism skill has increased to level 19.
You've created the Dislodgement spell!
Your Creation skill has increased to level 7.

I didn't bother to check the spell's description. I already had a basic idea of what it could do. I even didn't need to check its mana cost. Why should I, if the Heart would foot the bill, anyway? I could cast anything I could think of, which I fully intended to do.

The spell's mental pressure started to push back those closest to me, as if they were protesters being repulsed by riot police. Slowly but insistently. I could see their confusion and their resistance as they started to push and shove each other. One of them tarried a bit longer than he should have done, finding himself between my invisible pressure and the massive monument. The *Dislodgement* was stronger than marble. With a short yelp, the Player was buried under the crumbling statue. The spell finished the job off by crushing what was left of his limbs.

After about ten seconds, those Players who'd been standing the furthest away, came out of their stupor and started attacking me with all kinds of simple spells, aiming to remove as many shields from me as possible. Fireballs, Ice Arrows, Summoned Rocks... All of them disintegrated on contact with my Veils, taking it with them too — but in the time it took them to strip me of one, I would create two more. Before one of my Mantles shattered in a flurry of sparks, I would cast another one.

Could I say that I reveled in my omnipotence? Absolutely. Man is weak and strong at the same time. The mortal sins and vices are so called exactly because they're inherent to every mortal.

And I actually turned out to be quite vain. The sense of my superiority to these movers and shakers was mind-blowing. Blood seethed in my veins; my skin erupted in goosebumps. My lips dried with the anticipation of victory.

Predictably, someone had to dampen my ardor.

I didn’t get the chance to see the weapon he’d fired. The way I felt, it must have been a mortar launcher. And judging by its size, it had to be at least a machine gun. My head rattled down the steps, smashing them, until I got buried under a heap of rubble.

This place might indeed need some serious reconstruction soon.

But the funny thing was, even though they’d removed a good twenty Mantles from me, literally burying me alive with some trump card they must have had stashed up their collective sleeve — but I hadn’t even lost consciousness. The Heart throbbed but once in my hand, sending a shrapnel-like flurry of stones that had buried me in every direction, releasing my perfectly intact body.

This was the slap in the face that woke me up, finally forcing me to take my opponents seriously instead of reveling in my own greatness. Now I really want to put a quick end to this preposterous battle of a demigod and some mortal midgets.

The next spell materialized clearly in my head. It was relatively simple: two rings studded with sharp spikes which moved in the opposite directions one against the other. I suppose, I could also set them on fire, of course, just for the theatrics of it, why not?

The Heart worked like a dream. I was actually getting used to it. The rings turned out to be so big they grazed the nearest Players who instantly caught fire.

You’ve created the Fiery Chakram spell!
Your Creation skill has increased to level 8.

I wouldn’t say this was the exact spell I’d had in mind. At least this “chakram” thing didn’t look like the one Xena the Warrior Princess used to

wield in the TV series responsible for my childhood crush on Lucy Lawless. Never mind. It didn't matter, anyway. A boat's name doesn't matter; what does matter is how well it masters the waves.

I squeezed the Heart harder, as if the power it released depended on rough physical impact, and made the rings wider. They screeched, releasing fountains of sparks, then gradually began to expand, all the while continuing to move against each other.

You've killed a Player who was hostile to you.

A change in development branch available: Devourer. In order to activate it, you need to select it as your new development branch within the next 24 hours.

You've gained the Booster spell.

Your Destruction skill has increased to level 16.

You've killed a Player who was hostile to you...

I glanced at all the incoming messages flashing past. Four Players in under two seconds. The rings' speed as well as the sheer number of spikes seemed to neutralize their protective spells. Okay, maybe not all of them but the best part of them. If you added the fire damage, it was a veritable wunderwaffe.

The local Players kept firing at me, trying to fight back, but almost all of them were backing off. Even the strongest and boldest of them were casting timid glances at their peers. Some had long fled, realizing that nothing good could come out of this. A very wise decision, in my opinion.

I stepped forward. The spinning rings moved in synch. Everything touched by their spikes snapped and split, flying in every direction. Pure destruction, to put it mildly. Everything was gone: the temple steps, the entrance, even some of the walls.

At a certain moment, I even looked back, afraid that the Gatekeepers might decide I'd gone too far. But no: the temple was still standing, its roof and load-bearing walls still in one piece. As for all the trivialities, including the noise outside, the Gatekeepers apparently didn't give a damn.

Now the Players were retreating quicker than I could catch up with them. Actually, I had absolutely no desire to go chasing after every one of them.

I raised the Heart in my hand and doubled my mental effort.

Immediately the rings began to rapidly grow in size until they parted, trying to grab as much free space as possible. Of course, the damage they were dealing now as they grew was negligible compared to the colossal harm they'd initially inflicted — but even that was more than enough.

You've created a new spell: An Expanding Ring of Pain
Your Creation skill has increased to level 9.
Your Destruction skill has increased to level 17.

You've killed a Player who was hostile to you...

I quickly counted the bodies. Eleven dead Players. So! Also, if new system messages were to be believed, the price tag on my not-too-humble self had considerably risen:

Your fame has increased to 43.
Your fame has increased to 44.
Your fame has increased to 45.

No idea what could have caused it. It could have been all the destruction I'd wreaked at the city center, or all the mass murders, or the number of dead Players per square foot...

In my brief stint as a Player, I'd already learned to take certain things for granted. So my Fame has grown, so what? I might actually be just as

popular right now as Arts was after she'd demolished the Libs' camp. The most important thing was, most of our enemies lay defeated, while any survivors would think twice in the foreseeable future before challenging me again.

"Arts," I called in a suddenly low voice. I cleared my throat and repeated, "Arts! You can come out now!"

It took me five or six attempts to lure her out. Finally, the girl peeked out, looking rather fearful.

I couldn't blame her. The doorway to the Temple had collapsed, heaped waist-high with debris. The area around it wasn't terribly tidy, either. Still, eventually she ventured out of her shelter, approaching me slowly but surely.

"What the hell happe—" she cut herself short mid-word.

"Sorry. They shouldn't have screwed with me, should they?"

"Listen Serge," she said, her angry voice wary. "I have a funny feeling this thing... this Heart... is controlling you. Look at what you've done."

"I just cleared the way. For both of us."

"Is that what you call it, 'clear the way'? I don't recognize you."

"I'm okay," I calmly began to explain. "It can't control me. Yes, I've grown a lot stronger but it's only temporarily. And yes, I'm fully aware that it's the Heart that did it. As soon as we get to the Choruls and they tell us the answers to our questions, I'll get rid of the Heart, I promise. Do you believe me?"

"I do," she said in a low voice. "But only because your eyes seem to glow less now. Before, you looked like a stranded alien. What do we do

now?”

“I don’t know. You should take my hand to begin with. The Gatekeeper said that they need an altar in order to teleport anyone. But we’ll just try it this way first. Just don’t let go of my hand! What was it he said? You need to focus on the world you’re going to and imagine the faces of those you expect to see...”

“Come on then, go ahead.”

“I wish I knew how to do it,” I said, closing my eyelids.

The vision of the three dudes in hooded robes instantly rose before my inner vision. What else did I know about Archaeth? The world that lay beyond the black passageway that stretched past two consecutive Hazy worlds... It might actually work...

My vision darkened, and....

And nothing. The world where we’d just been was gone, replaced with absolute nothingness.

At least that was my first impression. Only when a cold breeze touched my skin, bringing with it the familiar stench — the spiders’ body odor — I realized where we were.

Arts, however, had worked it out almost instantly. “It’s Hist!”

I managed to raise the Heart over my head, activating the Fiery Chakram moments before the spiders attacked us.

Judging by the crunchy sound, someone’s chitinous armor must have taken a hit. The blast hadn’t hurt our eyes which hadn’t yet adapted to the local darkness, but the spiders — which admittedly weren’t many — scattered in all directions, unprepared for this advanced light show.

Still, I wasn’t worried about it at all. I began scrolling through my interface but found nothing apart from a few more confusing messages:

Your fame has increased to 46.
Your fame has increased to 47.
Your fame has increased to 48.
Your fame has increased to 49.
Your fame has increased to 50.

Your Destruction skill has increased to level 18.

Okay. I had a funny feeling I knew what was going on. I must have received all this fame for using the Heart as intended, namely to jump to another world. Apparently, there weren’t many Players around who could boast this kind of feat. As for Destruction, I must have received it for offing a couple of spiders with my Fiery Chakram — well, they should have stayed out of the way, shouldn’t they?

That wasn’t what I wanted to know. The big question was, what the hell were we doing in Hist?

“Beyond the black passageway that stretches past two consecutive Hazy worlds,” I murmured.

Arts perked up. “What did you say?”

“Nothing really. That’s what Hunter told me once.”

“Can you please repeat it,” she said, pinning me with her stare.

The fire reflections in her eyes seemed to mesmerize me, like a rabbit under a python’s hypnotizing gaze.

“He said that Archaeth was located beyond the black passageway that stretched past two consecutive Hazy worlds.”

“And you said nothing about it all this time? Okay, now listen. We have this really stupid and dated classification of all the worlds, based on their weather conditions. Don’t look at me like that! I told you it was stupid. And dated. In the old days, going on vacation to warmer and sunnier places like Ooont was *the* thing. And those with bad weather were classified as Hazy. Are you getting me?”

“Not really.”

“If you take Cesspit, for instance, the two closest Hazy worlds are Ullum and Qird.”

I remembered the permanently overcast sky over the pillaged dwarven settlement. I wouldn’t exactly call it a holiday destination. I couldn’t speak for the beastmen world though because I’d never been there.

“Okay,” I said, “but what about the black passageway?”

“Oh Serge, for crying out loud! Look behind you! Hist is the last world before Archaeth! It *is* the black passageway!”

“I don’t think so. It’s Ooont that goes after Hist. I remember it very well.”

“That’s the easy part. Just think about it. Gatekeepers can create new paths between worlds as they please. They can open and close portals at leisure.”

“So you think they simply hid Archaeth from us?”

“Absolutely. I also think that your new friend didn’t tell us everything. Otherwise we would have arrived directly at Archaeth — but we ended up here instead.”

I took a quick look around me, finding my bearings. “I think he was right. The Heart transported us to the nearest available point. Because we

don’t have enough information to properly visualize our destination. But the answer must be here somewhere...”

The Fiery Chakram transformed into *an Expanding Ring of Pain* to catch up with the fleeing spiders. Not that I was that bloodthirsty — but still the system splurged on a little bonus for me:

Your Destruction skill has increased to level 19.

There was something else, too. The dancing flames illuminated a small building which I wouldn’t have noticed otherwise.

I poked Arts in the ribs and pointed, attracting her attention. She must have seen something there because she ouched and quickly covered her mouth.

I cast Light and headed for the building which was literally stuck in between rocks. And the closer I got, the clearer I realized what awaited me there.

“It’s a Gatehouse,” Arts said softly, confirming my suspicions.

“Was. A couple of centuries ago. Probably.”

The door had been blown off its hinges, the empty doorway clogged with cobwebs. Arts was already busy burning them away.

Predictably, there was no Gatekeeper inside. But the interior was still in a decent shape, courtesy of the spiders. The floor was powdered with dust. Even the portal stone was still there.

Then it clicked. “I know where it leads.”

Arts nodded. “To Archaeth. Fancy stepping into a Gatekeeper’s shoes?”

I chuckled, feeling nervous. “Maybe just this once. Let’s try.”

We took our places around the stone, almost simultaneously touching its smooth, cold surface. I couldn’t even tell which of the hearts beat faster: my own or the artifact’s.

It spewed out a geyser of dust which rose into the air.

The dust which was already scattered on the floor followed suit.

We teleported.

Traveling between worlds unassisted actually turned out to be remarkably pleasurable. The first time it had happened, I hadn’t gotten the chance to properly take it in: it had happened too fast and ended unexpectedly in pitch blackness. This time it was different. It felt like going down in a rollercoaster, only much slower — slow enough to anticipate what was about to happen. You knew that your heart was going to miss a beat; that your mouth would turn dry with the oncoming wind, but that eventually, everything will work out just fine.

Which was exactly what happened.

Your fame has increased to 51.
Your fame has increased to 52.
Your fame has increased to 53.

I reluctantly let go of the altar, still trying to stop the shivering inside.

This Gatehouse was brightly lit and well-appointed. No signs of abandon anywhere. Even the Gatekeeper stood at his post, glaring at me from under his closed helmet.

Had it really worked?

“You’d better put that thing away, Player,” the Gatekeeper said, pointing at the Heart.

Of course. Too touchy to see it in the hands of someone who wasn’t your race? Or whatever you were supposed to be.

Never mind. I didn’t object. Besides, I could sense that all the recent battles and portal jumps had depleted its mana supplies quite a bit. There was still plenty left for more activations, but its stocks of dust were considerably lower now compared to what it had received back in the Pit.

Irrelevant, anyway. The main thing was, I was in Archaeth!

I laid my hand on Arts’ shoulder. She cast me a quick glance, smiling warily like a child who didn’t yet know whether this new development boded well.

Together we walked out of the Gatehouse — but before we could take a few steps, we saw the three beings awaiting us.

The creatures from my dreams.

“Hi Serge,” said the one in the middle, his voice painfully familiar. “It took you a while. Honestly, we’d almost lost hope. Welcome to the world of Choruls.”

He shrugged off the hood and stepped toward me.

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Chapter 26

ALL THE TRULY GREAT THINGS are born from within. From inside you. Here's a simple but obvious example: if an egg gets broken from the inside, it means that it's currently in the process of hatching, releasing a new life that has grown within. But if it gets broken on the outside, it initiates the process of death and destruction.

Similarly, all our actions reflect our inner nature, to a point. They're just a manifestation of something that had once germinated deep inside your heart, only to grow and develop to its current form.

At least this was what the main Chorul told me. His specialization described him as a ***Diviner***, which meant that I had to mind both my tongue and my thoughts in his presence. He also described himself as "the Voice of Ephet 3". Not that it explained much, but admittedly what he'd just told me made sense. According to him, all that the Choruls had done was direct me a little, steering me in the right direction, but apparently I'd found the way here all by myself, simply because I really wanted to get here.

Of course. After all, it was one of them who'd chosen to cross paths with me, transforming me into a Player and passing his abilities on to me. It was them who'd sent him to intercept me in that construction pit back in my home town.

"We didn't send anyone. That was his own choice."

Ouch! What did I say? You really had to mind your thoughts in his presence.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “He can’t have chosen to die, surely?”

“People can be quite a mystery. It can take a lot of hard work to understand the motives of a human being.”

“Are *you* human?” I blurted.

My question actually made sense. In terms of human race, this dude didn’t differ from me in the slightest. He had a big fluffy head of fiery red hair, a generous smattering of freckles and an upturned nose. His expression was friendly and good-natured.

And still there was something about him I couldn’t quite put my finger on... or it could be my gut feeling telling me that things weren’t as simple as they looked.

“I come from Meyer, if that’s what you mean,” the Diviner said with a chuckle. “But as you probably noticed, our racial philosophies are actually quite similar in that all races are born equal. Dreamwalker here is human, born in Cesspit. I’ll tell you more; he actually comes from your home country.

“No way!” I exclaimed, turning to the guy he’d introduced as Dreamwalker. “Where are you from? Moscow, St. P? Or somewhere further down?”

The pudgy middle-aged man next to him gave me a sarcastic look. He folded his hands on what definitely appeared to be a beer belly and spoke in a syrupy voice,

“I am originally from the Fortress of Orsk, my dear sir, but I have seen my fair share of this world. I was in St. Petersburg too — in fact, I was there at the Senate Square at the time of the Decembrists’ revolt. I was on the very first train to Moscow! But then I gave it all up and left for the Urals. Couldn’t stand the St Petersburg climate for much longer. I was

already a Player back then, and still I couldn’t get used to that constant drizzly fog that passes for weather there.”

I mentally scratched the back of my head. The Decembrists’ revolt at the Senate Square — that was 1825, wasn’t it? I may not be a history expert, but this little I knew. Which meant he must have been at least two hundred years old.

I double-checked his name tag. A *Dreamwalker?* Of course! “So it was you who visited me in my dreams?”

“Well, what do you think? I’m not entirely incapable yet,” he said — not boasting but just stating the fact. “Also, Lidaress directed me.”

I switched my attention to the last Chorul of the three: a small crocwoman with a tiny triangular nose, huge eyes (for a croc) and pale green skin. The name tag hovering over her head indeed identified her as a ***LiDARess***.

“What do you mean, she directed you?” I asked.

“Well, let’s put it this way,” the crocwoman replied in a soft, velvety lisp. “I can locate a Player by the items in their inventory, provided I know what they are.”

“The Moon Steel dagger,” I realized. “It was the Chorul who’d sent it to me with Hunter.”

She nodded. “And the mirror. Normally, that’s enough to try and locate a Player. But the more entry points I have, the more I can find out about the target. Their thoughts, their fears, their regrets... By the time you had the third item, we’d already kept tabs on you.”

“Which was what?”

“The Repelling Stone. It was also the Chorul who’d passed it on to that little boy — Boris, wasn’t it? — knowing you’d take it from him.”

“Why do you keep calling him just “Chorul?” I asked. “You all have names, don’t you?”

“He never gave us his name when he came here,” the Diviner replied. “He didn’t speak to me at all.”

“So what makes you think he was a Chorul?”

“That’s what he said. We had no reason not to believe him. The only people who can come here are those who deliberately seek us out. Which means they want to become like us. There’s no other way. He told us he was a Chorul. And not just any Chorul but the Voice of Ephet 76.”

“I’m afraid you’ve completely lost me.”

“That’s because you’re trying to embrace all the beauty and variety of a valley while standing on the bottom of a ravine. Even I, with my centuries of experience, found it hard to grasp the entire scope of his personality.”

“Okay. In that case, we could discuss it some other time. I’m a bit pressed for time now, I’m afraid. So what am I supposed to do?”

“Take a look around. If you really want to become a Chorul, then you need to know everything about Archaeth, don’t you?”

I didn’t reply. I’d come here looking for answers but all I’d found was even more questions.

Both Diviner and his two sidekicks watched me with badly concealed curiosity. It was as if they knew something they couldn’t yet tell me.

Never mind. Let’s take a look around, as you say, seeing as we were here anyway.

Archaeth was the name of both the world and the only city in it. According to Diviner, this was the reason they had neither guards nor even a town wall, simply because there were no other sentient beings here.

Plus, there were only two ways of coming here, one of which I'd just used. The other Gatehouse had been shut down by Gatekeepers who'd essentially closed Archaeth down. The Choruls seemed to have some kind of agreement with them. If Diviner was to be believed, they were allowed to have food delivered here by Gatekeepers, as well as all the necessities.

Which raised another big question: how did the Gatekeepers, those masters of Anchor World, profit from it?

The city was impressive. The tall smooth walls of the buildings; the broad avenues lined with sprawling old trees... And not a single car, or, God forbid, an airbike in sight. This place was the proverbial Amish paradise.

"This is our library," Diviner said, noticing my interest in the tallest of the buildings. "It contains all the knowledge about all the worlds, both open and closed ones, including all their historic information. It also has an extensive database of the most prominent Players. It took us centuries to collect the information, and we will continue to do so."

Just like my own curiosity was directed toward the library, the expressions of Chorul onlookers betrayed their interest in yours truly. Some even exchanged whispered comments, although admittedly they were well-bred enough not to point any fingers.

I could understand them. If what Diviner had said about the shutting the Hist portal down was true, they can't have had many Players since. The locals were probably pretty fed up by now, having to stare at the same old bunch of faces.

"But you're not just Players, are you?" I asked, even though all I could see was witness to the opposite. These so-called "Choruls" were just

regular Players — development branches and all — which came from all walks and races of Interworld Network. This was basically just yet another Order. So I felt obliged to add, “From what I hear, you can see the future.”

“It doesn’t quite work like that,” Diviner said.

The others smiled too — or should I say, Lidaress cringed in a reluctant half-smirk.

“Let’s put it this way,” Diviner continued. “Once we’ve undergone a certain *alteration*, we can keep track of thousands of potential development scenarios that comprise the fate lines of all life in the Universe. That’s really not easy and requires a certain effort. But whenever someone’s fate comes to the proverbial crossroads, we know it’s our job to make a choice, so we do it. It feels a bit like a déjà vu. The tips of our fingers start to prickle whenever it happens.”

“But what do you mean by a ‘certain alteration’?”

Both Dreamwalker and Lidaress turned to their leader. Still, he wasn’t in a hurry to reply.

“Come on, guys, don’t drag it out,” I said. “If I’m supposed to become a Chorul, I need to know what kind of sacrifice it involves.”

Your Persuasion skill has increased to level 29.

“Okay,” Diviner replied. “I’m gonna tell you how it all started. Or rather, *who* started all this. There were these two Players, one was called Chronos and the other Chorul. They found each other across the entire Universe. They became friends. One was a great inventor, the other an equally great leader. Chronos wanted to know everything about the nature of Players. Their abilities, their development branches. He spent a lot of time among Gatekeepers and discovered the secret of the Heart. He learned to use great amounts of dust in his inventions.”

He paused, taking a deep breath. “Now Chorul, he was totally different. He wanted to know everything about balance — or rather, how to keep worlds in balance.”

“Let me guess. One of them killed the other, is that it?”

“Do they still have those horrible tabloid stories back in Cesspit?” Dreamwalker butted in. “Take my advice and never listen to what they have to say.”

“Not at all,” Diviner replied. “It was Chronos who killed himself. He built so many amazing machines. All the inventions he made, meant to turn a Player’s life for the better. Until finally, he created a device which allows us to see all the life lines in the Universe all at once. That was his *pièce de résistance*. His masterpiece. Still, he also knew that in order for the machine to work properly, he had to give it his all. He had to sacrifice himself to it.”

I froze. “He killed himself because of his machine?”

“He killed himself because he wanted to help all Players. Thanks to his own development branch, he could see one step ahead. By then, both he and Chorul had made Archaeth their home. A few other Players joined them. This is a beautiful world — but it’s blocked by the deadly Hist, the world of spiders. Only the strongest of the brave can find their way here.”

He paused. “After Chronos’ death, his best friend Chorul kept all of his inventions before continuing on his own way. Some of Chronos’ creations still work — but it’s the greatest invention of his life that makes us what we are now.”

“And what happened to his friend Chorul?”

“He died too,” Diviner replied curtly. “He too laid down his life while trying to return balance to one of the worlds. To commemorate him, his followers started calling themselves Choruls.”

“So that’s your modus operandi? To die for a noble cause, is that it? Which means you’re just a bunch of religious fanatics, correct?”

Diviner smiled. “We’re not fanatics. You could, I suppose, safely liken us to Gatekeepers. Which was why they made such generous concessions, allowing us to ignore customs regulations and locking this world away from prying eyes. The Gatekeepers’ purpose is to keep the Universe in motion. They make sure the Gates are intact and available for free travel. But that’s the extent of it. It’s us who keep the Universe in balance. As soon as we get word of an imba Player whose abilities threaten to tip the scales, we take care of him or her.”

“You kill them?” I asked.

“Not at all. We make sure we find a counterbalance to their powers. Or try to dampen the imba Player’s own abilities, as it happened with the Horsemen. We knew very well that if we found other Players with similar powers and tried to pit them against each other, that would doom your world — and probably all the neighboring worlds too — to death and immense suffering. So we destroyed their unity from inside by making Morbian betray them.”

“But what about Serge?” Arts spoke for the first time. “What do you want from him now?”

I turned to her. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, that’s pretty obvious, isn’t it? You are the imba Player they’re talking about. Don’t you understand?”

“That’s exactly what it is,” Diviner said with the shy smile of an executioner too embarrassed to do his job. “We were looking for you. To be completely honest, there’s a war coming. It would have been stupid to ignore such a powerful variable as yourself.”

“Do I really make such a difference?”

“Don’t you understand? A Player who can rewind time. Who is currently in possession of the two most powerful Avatars in the whole of the Universe. The only reason why you’re still alive is because you leveled up quickly and managed to get here before all the headhunters. But even if you decide to retire, sooner or later they’ll come after you. You’re too much of a tasty morsel.”

“They have already,” I said, remembering all the attacks back in Cesspit.

“It’ll only get worse. It’s gonna snowball.”

“But Serge can relinquish the Avatars,” Arts butted in again.

“Which is probably the only way to ensure they don’t fall into ill-meaning hands,” Diviner agreed. “Unfortunately, it’ll have little bearing on their desire to kill him, even if just to ensure that the Avatars aren’t on him anymore.”

I gave him a long look. “So what am I supposed to do?”

“Become one of us.”

“And my problems would just disappear?”

“Not really. But at least you might be able to solve them just by getting a different prospective.”

“And if I say no?”

“Then you can leave. The local Gatekeeper can send you to any world of your choice. We have no limitations in this respect. You can go back to Cesspit. Or Elysium. Or Mechilos even.”

I got the impression he was pulling my leg, because those were the exact places I was banned from. His face was perfectly unreadable. Dreamwalker was grinning though, as if he knew the answer, his expression saying clearly, ‘you ain’t goin’ nowhere now’.

Still, something admittedly puerile within me seemed to rebel against this predetermination. “I need some time to think.”

“Of course. The decision is entirely yours. No one’s gonna force you to do anything. Go look around. Check out the library. Lots of interesting stuff there. You have plenty of time. Once you’ve made up your mind, you can find me.”

Now I knew he was being sarcastic. Time was something I didn’t have. But I had no intention of admitting it to him.

The three walked away, leaving us two alone.

“I don’t like them,” Arts said.

“They’re not all Barbie dolls to be liked by you. It’s true I didn’t get an answer out of them. I think they’re doing this on purpose. A bit like a drug peddler who gives you your first fix for free. And once you’re hooked...”

“So what do you suggest? You really want us to become Choruls?”

“No one wants anything from you. No sacrifices needed.”

She pursed her lips, looking daggers at me. Still, she replied after a pause, “Personally, I don’t think that their balance-keeping gig is such a bad idea. Our worlds could use more of it, that’s for sure.”

“Yep. I just want to know the price tag they put on this balance thing. Anyway, let’s go check out their library. I can’t see anything else of any interest here.”

The local library resembled a giant medieval cathedral. Its vaulted ceiling rose so high I couldn’t make out any details on it at all. The massive bookcases were fitted with rolling ladders. The aisles were wide enough for a small car to drive through. The sight of the few berobed Choruls gave you the impression you were walking through the seat of some posh monastic order...

“Hi, how can I help you?” a two-headed ogre addressed me with the air of a sales rep.

Still, he didn’t remain an ogre for long. Seeing my discomfort, he almost immediately changed his appearance. Now he looked like a human being: a small dark-haired young man with huge eyes and funny lug ears. I got the impression he’d selected that particular appearance on purpose, to make sure we weren’t afraid of him.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I’m from Keria. One of the few survivors, to be precise.”

“Keria? Do I know where it is?”

“Not anymore. Players burned it to a crisp. So the Gatekeepers have shut it down as unfit for habitation. Our resource was way too valuable for our own good.”

“What kind of resource is that?”

“It’s us. The Kerians themselves. We can change our appearance, even though only for a short while. Lots of Players would kill to lay their hands on one of us. Everybody wants a perfect spy as their slave. Sorry, I can’t keep it up for much longer...”

His skin rippled. The guy began to melt, both his face and his body liquifying, until he resembled a cross between a wrinkled lump of fat and a

thawing ice-cream. Barely three foot tall and covered in countless folds and creases, a sentient slug stared back at me. “Not so pretty now, eh?”

“A question of habit, I suppose,” I replied. “So what are you, some kind of librarian here?”

“An archivist, actually. I’m busy studying the Choruls’ unique library. And it’s still full of surprises!” he made a sweeping gesture with all four of his tiny arms, pointing at the unfathomable riches that surrounded me.

Actually, Arts’ gaze was already searching the bookcases. Apart from all the books, they also had parchments and papyrus scrolls, as well as stone and clay tablets. I even glimpsed some bizarre-looking cubes set aside: apparently, the product of some highly developed civilizations.

“From what I heard, you possess information on virtually every player,” I said.

The Kerian nodded, which very nearly caused his jellified head to slide down his back. “Provided he was of any importance, yes, absolutely.”

“Wonder if you happen to have something on... on Hunter?”

“Let’s take a look,” the Kerian transformed into a tall Archalus and fluttered off into the library’s depths.

I was obliged to run after him — but I soon got lost in the complex maze of bookcases.

Having spent another futile minute looking for him while cussing liberally, I finally came to the reading room — or whatever passed for it in this place. A few of the desks were taken by Choruls of a variety of races, busy leafing through enormous handwritten tomes.

After another couple of seconds, the Kerian reemerged, holding what looked like a very ancient little book. He set it on the nearest vacant table

and promptly transformed back to his real self, apparently exhausted from impersonating somebody else.

I stared at the written lines in awe, oblivious to everything around me. I even forgot to thank the Archivist. Because there in that book, a disjointed mixture of Cesspit languages told the story of my kind old mentor.

Cephalus, son of Deioneus. Born in Phocis (Cesspit, World # 28 in the Conventional World Classification. Initiation nickname: Hunter. Attempted to initiate his entire family, which attracted the ire of the contemporary demigods (see: Artemis and the Cesspit Gods on Record). His wife Procris was killed. Cephalus managed to save his two initiated sons Hesperus and Adumnis and escape from Cesspit with them.

Following that, Hunter [----------] before he began to specialize in searching for rare creatures. Purgator [----------]... the destruction of the Pillars of Hercules... [---------]...

The death of his eldest son Hesperus prompted him to return to Cesspit. (see: The Fifth Purgator and Firoll war). *Took an active part in the setup of the Order of Seers (See:* A Complete Classification of the Orders of Fringe Worlds*). Helped the Gatekeepers to conceal Austerius (see:* A Complete Classification of the Dangerous Artifacts Pertaining to the First Gods*)*

Retired from active participation in the affairs of the Interworld Network since the death of his second son Adumnis (*see:* A History of Cesspit as told by its Commoners).

Sources and Testimonies: [----------]

I looked up from the book. “There’re some missing bits here.”

“Not really,” the slug said. “It’s just that your Linguistics skill isn’t up to scratch. I’m not big on human dialects, either,” he admitted, apparently eager to have a chat. “It’s been a long while!”

“Serge!” Arts emerged from some library nook, holding a book in her hands.

Everybody, including myself, turned to give her an evil eye. Libraries are supposed to be quiet, aren’t they?

Still, she ignored our unspoken disapproval. “And you too, er.... egh....” she faltered, addressing the Kerian.

Oh. He hadn’t told us his name, had he?

What an awkward situation. But not for Arts, apparently:

“You, what’s your name, do I understand it correctly that your world — Keria, isn’t it? — is listed under #76?”

“Yes,” the slug replied. “It’s common knowledge. Why?”

I gulped, sensing my hair raise on end. Slowly I turned to Arts who was looking at me triumphantly, proud of her sleuth skills.

“Because,” I replied, “the first Player I killed was somehow connected to your world.”

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Chapter 27

OUR CHOICE OF PROFESSION defines us just as much as our country of origin, income, or social standing. When you think of a mechanic, you visualize a man in scruffy overalls smelling of diesel and motor oil. When you say “cake maker”, you imagine a smiley plump lady, just as nice and sweet as her cream cakes. That’s the power of stereotypes for you. They can flash across your head faster than you can embrace reality. Sometimes it helps; but more often than not it just annoys you, preventing you from seeing the big picture.

But how would you describe a Player? The thought had never crossed my mind before. The quick answer is: you can’t. But if you tweaked it a little, you could see a totally different picture. How would a Player’s specialization define his identity? — Easy. Each of us was looking for that very special place under the sun, seeking their own answers and rediscovering their very own purpose.

Could I really say that this was something that every human being on planet Earth was supposed to be doing? I could and I couldn’t. A human being is quite limited in this respect, tied up by both their problems and especially by their measly life span of some seventy or eighty years, give or take. For a Player, however, a life span was a very abstract notion, provided he or she knew how best to invest their almost limitless time.

To add to this, Players also faced another problem: namely, of rediscovering themselves across a great many worlds. This is probably what we call the search for meaning. For regular human beings, it might be but

an abstract notion veiled in eternity — but for someone striving to achieve absolute supremacy, this was the proverbial super objective.

My current task was simple and tricky at the same time. Why would the Voice of Ephet 76 have laid down his life in order to make me a Player?

By the way, we now knew who those Ephets were, thanks to our new friend the Kerian archivist.

Briefly speaking, the Choruls seemed to have a very peculiar hierarchy. They had a Council which was presided by Ephets who were apparently in charge of the worlds that Choruls supervised.

They did the job personally. For this reason, they were constantly away on their missions and therefore absent from Council meetings. Think undercover police force endowed with all the necessary jurisdiction. In all such cases, they used so-called “Voices”: specially picked Choruls charged with delivering their deliberations to the Council.

According to the books, the Council used to be huge. Eventually it had begun to shrink until it reached its current size. Some of the worlds that the Choruls controlled had been destroyed, while others had been shut down after being deserted by their inhabitants (either voluntarily or by force as the case of beastmen had been). At the same time, it wasn’t uncommon for an existing world to be not represented at the Council despite being listed in the catalog.

That’s where the conundrum of the Voice of Ephet 76 came in. The world listed under #76 was Keria — which just didn’t make sense, because there was no Ephet posted to Keria at all at the moment. But still he had a Voice representing him. Moreover, it had happened so recently that no one had even bothered to find out who it actually was.

Imagine that someone turns up at work one fine day and says he works here — and not just as any old employee but the assistant production manager, no less. Which would have been all well and good — but you

know that this particular job had been done away with. If it sounds like a bunch of bull, that's because it is. But the archivist didn't seem to mind this predicament, which he'd already told us in as many words. And as I understood it, he wasn't the only Council member happy with the status quo.

"Ooh, I found it!" Arts interrupted my musings. "This is your Moon Steel dagger! Look at the list, it's as long as my arm!"

"All the items that have ever existed in any of the network's worlds are properly numbered and catalogued," our Kerian friend helpfully butted in.

"Why would they do that?" I asked.

"Because it's convenient," the archivist replied, quite surprised. "If you give an item's catalog number to someone, they'll know instantly what you're talking about."

I chuckled. "If you say so." Still, the sarcasm in my voice seemed to have gone unnoticed.

I was preoccupied with something totally different. I stared at one of the books but the lines swam as if I was looking at a blurred picture in one of those stereoscopes from my childhood. Diviner was the only person who could have any serious answers — but I knew very well what he wanted from me.

"It's all about balance," I said softly.

"What?" Arts asked.

"I said, balance," I gave her a long look. "Maybe their offer is not as bad as we think?"

“Honestly, I had my doubts,” Arts admitted, “but considering how many worlds are off limits for us now, it might be an option. And if you think how many Players would eagerly volunteer to do us both in, we might be better off staying with Choruls. They seem to be powerful enough to protect us.”

“Possibly. You’re right in one thing: we’ve got nowhere else to turn to. Seeing as we’ve taken the first step, we might just as well carry on. Let’s go and find Diviner.”

The archivist gave us a hearty farewell. Strangely enough, he was quite cordial with us, just like all the other Choruls we’d encountered in the library. Normally, it’s the other way round: nobody likes a stranger, aware of the fact that they might upset the applecart. But it was the opposite in our case: we got the impression that we’d been expected.

It didn’t take me long to find Diviner. All I had to do was ask the first Kabirid woman I came across. She was so eager to help she almost dragged me to one of the buildings and handed me over to Lidaress. That done, she sauntered off under Arts’ disapproving glare, swaying her hips which not even her free-flowing robes could hide. Her pencil-thin tail poking through a special hole only served to add a piquant touch to her departure.

“Diviner has been waiting for you,” the croc woman said, inviting me in.

I half-expected to see a well-appointed mansion, as the outside of the building was already quite impressive. But it turned out to be quite Spartan in its décor. A few beds, a desk, a chair, some stationery, a magic crystal which served as a source of light, and a door to the next room. I never found out what was beyond it because Diviner was here, sitting at the desk.

He stood up to meet us, levering himself up like an old man. Only when he smiled did I realize that he wasn’t that young at all. He had a series of fine wrinkles hiding in the corners of his eyes. His smile brought a tragic

expression to his face. All his body language bore witness to his advanced age even though he didn't look it.

"The game allows me to appear younger than I actually am," he said. "But it can't work miracles. I was ninety-three years old when I became a Player. A bit too late to change my ways."

"So!" I said, doing some mental calculations.

"You said it. Honestly, I was quite opposed to all this. Some people really loathe dying. You know, don't you, that here in the Central Worlds you can have all your organs replaced with perfectly good new ones?"

"No, I didn't know but I guessed. They do similar stuff in Mechilos, only with bionic fittings."

"There's one organ they can't rejuvenate naturally though, and that's the brain. That's why there're so many old men walking around in young, fresh bodies. And that applies to Commoners, too. They actually might be better off than Players, to tell you the truth."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because the true value of life is in the fact that it's finite. That gives you a goal and a deadline. And when your existence stretches out into eternity so that there is no last day to put an end to it, life becomes boring."

"Yes, but you — I mean all of you Choruls — you seem to have come up with a goal for yourselves."

"Not just any old goal," he said, raising an authoritative finger, "The higher purpose. Which is the only thing that keeps you going when even the simplest of pleasures available to all commoners no longer bring you any joy. I didn't want any of this. I was perfectly ready to die. I had everything — a happy family, children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. My body was beginning to wear out, but it was perfectly normal. But then...

some idiots started a fight nearby. The next morning, I woke up a Player. Unfortunately, the old age had by then ingrained in my brain," he tapped his head with his knuckles. "Even now, three hundred years later, I still can't get rid of it completely. But you haven't come here just to listen to my moaning."

"No. I've made up my mind. I want to become a Chorul."

"We want to become Choruls," Arts piped up.

"You want to say that you've embraced the idea of the universal balance?" he said with a bitter smirk.

"Good point, but that's not the case. What I want is answers. I need to get to the heart of it. Before, I used to think that whatever happened to me was just a part of your plan. Apparently, it wasn't. And the more I find out about this Voice of Ephet 76, the more confident I am that you have absolutely nothing to do with what happened to him."

"Oh yes we do. He was a Chorul, after all."

"But you didn't order him to do what he did."

"Here, nobody can order a Player to voluntarily lay down their life. He just thought that in order to preserve the universal balance, he had to hand over his Avatar and his ability to you."

"Sounds like you know much more than you're letting on."

"Of course," he agreed with ease, "but that's not because I'm such a nasty old man. I'm just afraid that my explanation might not be enough for you."

"Which is exactly why I want to become a Chorul. I want to see my future."

“There’s no such thing as one future,” he corrected me. “We’re talking about a multitude of potential scenarios that might or might not transpire. But I knew you’d say that.”

“I knew you would. You’re a Chorul, after all.”

He laughed, and I couldn’t help joining in.

Gone was the pressure that had been weighing me down just lately. Right now, as I stood next to him, I suddenly realized that everything was going exactly as it should.

Arts didn’t join us though. “So what now?” she asked, dead serious. “How do we become Choruls? Are we supposed to swear some kind of binding Oath and seal it with our blood?”

Diviner cringed. “What a barbaric idea! Your intention is more than enough. And once you undergo the Revelation process, it won’t matter any longer, anyway. Actually, it’s time for us to be on our way. We’re expected.”

Accompanied by Diviner and Lidaress, we headed back to the library.

I still couldn’t get used to the fact that the Choruls knew everything that was about to happen. According to Diviner, Dreamwalker had already received the Council’s authorization for the Revelation procedure and was now busy setting it up.

“One word of warning, though,” Diviner continued. “The process is extremely energy-consuming. So we can’t let you both use Chronos’ machine at the same time. One of you will have to go first.”

“I will,” I said without even looking at Arts.

Don’t get me wrong: I hadn’t forgotten my Mom’s “ladies first” lectures. They just didn’t seem to apply to this particular case. Art’s silence

only convinced me that I'd done the right thing.

"Absolutely," Diviner said as if he'd known I'd say that. His question must have been a pure formality.

When we were about thirty feet away from the library's entrance, Diviner turned off, skirting its façade, until we came to a passageway which led to what appeared to be the building's basement.

Another berobed Player awaited us there. He bowed slightly to Diviner and cast a studying look over Arts and myself. "Everything's ready," he said.

"Excellent," Diviner replied, then motioned us to follow him downstairs.

This was a real honest-to-God ancient dungeon, probably hundreds of years old. Its walls were faced with stone, its structure reinforced with fat beams.

But that wasn't the interesting thing. The big question was, why did they need to keep the machine (or whatever it was supposed to be) here? Wouldn't it have been easier to set it up outside?

"When Chronos first built the Revelator, the Central Worlds were still in their infancy," Diviner explained. "He set it up right there in a deep ravine. But many years later, the Revelator was buried under a rockfall."

"And I thought you guys could foresee everything," I said, unable to resist a jibe.

"Of course. Which was why we didn't move it, just built some walls around it and put a roof over it. Chronos may have been a talented inventor but he wasn't really capable of getting along with fellow Players very well. He just couldn't wrap his head around the fact that you couldn't leave this

sort of thing outside for everyone to see. This world may be quiet now, but it's seen its fair share of looting in its day."

"So you just built a library over it, is that it?"

"If you need to hide something really well, you need to leave it in full view of everyone," Diviner replied. "When this place is invaded and the enemy kills every single one of us, they still won't be able to find it."

"You mean, *if* you're invaded?" I corrected him.

Diviner turned to look at me but said nothing.

Which made me quite uncomfortable. Was the ignorance of your own future any scarier than the certainty of it? Would it be better to know the exact day and place of your own demise — or would you rather trade it in for dozens of unresolved questions which don't let you sleep at night?

Personally, I'd already made up my mind.

We came to a room. At first, I couldn't work out where exactly the machine was. But after I'd taken a better look, I realized that the room *was* the machine: a confusing mishmash of intertwining wires, round plates — apparently made of silver and capable of conducting electrical charges — and electrodes swimming in liquid. All this jumble of unrelated objects was apparently Chronos' fabled contraption.

The most interesting thing was sitting at its middle: a blueish purple whiff of fog which hovered in mid-air like a raincloud, secured in place with some clasps and apparently living a life of its own. It was encircled with a row of small pedestals covered with liberal amounts of dust.

Dreamwalker stood nearby in the company of several others.

"What do I need to do?" I asked Diviner.

“Sit down here,” he said, pointing at a massive chair bolted to the floor. Its front legs and armrests were fitted with wide leather straps which looked almost new — and the chair itself didn’t appear to be too old, either. They must have had it replaced only recently — like, a couple hundred years ago.

Admittedly, the sight of the leather straps had put me off a little. Like any human being, I didn’t enjoy my freedom being restrained. The cloud, too, which kept trying to escape the metallic clasps that held it in place, made me rather uncomfortable.

Was this all that was left of Chronos? In which case, how had he managed to create an essence of himself? Or was it all my imagination? Could this be a fissioned Heart or something? God knows...

Still, I walked over to the chair and sat down.

The Choruls came closer and fastened my arms and legs.

Then Diviner produced a mouth gag. “It’s gonna hurt, but not for very long. Still, the entire experience is quite unpleasant. You’ll need this to make sure you don’t bite your tongue.”

“You didn’t tell me you were going to electrocute me,” I blurted, trying to brave it, although I was shaking with fear.

Still, my objective was worth it. I absolutely had to see how it would all pan out.

Diviner stepped aside and nodded to someone behind my back. Arts stood nearby, white as a sheet, her staff at the ready. I shook my head, warning her not to do anything stupid.

Then pain seized all of my muscles.

The funny thing was, I'd been almost right. It really felt like they were electrocuting me — but honestly, compared to what I'd had to undergo back in the Pit, this pain was child's play.

Especially because it didn't last for very long. At a certain moment, I just felt myself being scooped up and ejected into some other place entirely.

* * *

I can taste the cheap rubber of the pacifier that Gran has just bought. I can hear her argue with Mom; they disinfect the thing in boiling water and give it to me. My gums are sore from teething; I grab the pacifier gladly. Mom is amazed. Gran laughs.

* * *

Misha is my best kindergarten friend. He lives one house further down the road, but we never play together when we're home. We only play in the kindergarten. Now we're playing tag; he runs after me and reaches out to tag me but pushes me accidentally, sending me into a very unlucky fall. I hear a dry cracking noise like the sound of a bike crushing a dry twig. My hand explodes in pain. The scared face of our teacher leans over me. She's saying something, trying to comfort me, while I decide I'll never play with Misha again.

* * *

Dad comes from work earlier than usual. He's not alone. He keeps saying something about "a swap" and "an excellent deal".

My sisters peek from behind his back: the little Darya clinging to the wary, invariably silent Lily.

Finally, Dad brings in several cardboard boxes and says we now have a computer.

My eyes lit up with joy. My classmate Simon has one exactly like this. He even let me play *Prince of Persia* for a few minutes. And now we have it all for ourselves!

“Only for half an hour a day,” Dad warns me. “They say there’s a special program here you can use to draw pictures.”

* * *

The smell of my new silicon phone case is intoxicating. I struggle to put it on my brand-new Nokia3310.

My first cell phone. A birthday present from my parents. Dad keeps grumbling something about “expensive gifts” and “spoiling the child”.

But right now I’m happy. It’s a grownup gift for a grownup me.

* * *

I’m perched on the couch in Gran’s apartment. Dad goes on and on about life and its responsibilities. It’s about time I took it seriously, he says. Built myself a future, he says. Find a starting point.

I know all this but right now, I’m very sad. Gran has died as discreetly as she lived.

Only now do I realize how much I love her. I miss her terribly. Even this apartment that she left in my name does nothing to cheer me up.

* * *

I’m lying on the floor staring at the ceiling. My back feels like a wooden plank after my first workday.

I’m too depressed, thinking about my new co-workers, the crazy warehouse manager that won’t give us one moment’s rest and about the

long commute.

Still, the thought of my Dad's constant grumbling brings a triumphant grin to my face. I scramble back to my feet and head for the kitchen to cook a quick dinner.

* * *

Overcoming pain, I bite my lip as I lean against the frozen ground, trying to stand up. My opponent is too busy swatting his smoking hood, so he misses my next blow and falls.

I hear the unpleasant cracking sound. Now I can finally say with all certainty: he smashed his head against a rock as he fell.

"Is he OK?" little Boris asks me.

* * *

My future disintegrates into a multitude of potential scenarios. Each and every one of them ends with my death.

I'm about to die young. It might happen in less than two weeks, or in just over a year — but I inevitably get killed, regardless of the many kinds of lives I might live, some of them virtually identical.

At first, I can see a few dozen of them; then they begin to splice into hundreds and thousands. Most of them are discarded almost straight away as the least probable; others are defined better than the rest.

This goes on until I finally single out the one where I glimpse Him.

As soon as I do that, I'm kicked out. I'm back.

Your fame has increased to 54.
Your fame has increased to 55.

Your fame has increased to 56.
Your fame has increased to 57.

“Untie him, quick!” Diviner spewed out orders.

My mouth was filled with the metallic taste of blood. The gag was soaked.

All those present crowded before me, Arts included.

“Why is he bleeding?” Arts yelled at Diviner. “What the hell’s going on here?”

“It happens. The human brain struggles to process such a large amount of data. That’s why it—”

“No, you listen to me! If anything happens to him, I...”

Finally liberated, I collapsed into the Choruls’ supporting hands. They carried me out like I was some stage-diving rock star.

The fresh air indeed did me some good. Despite a splitting headache and what felt like a major hangover, I gradually began to come round.

“Serge,” Arts was stroking my face, smearing blood all over her hands. “How are you now?”

“I’m fine. I’m OK,” I gasped, trying to breathe and speak at the same time. “I know everything now. I saw the future. Now it all makes sense.”

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Chapter 28

THE HARDEST CONVERSATIONS are with those who are real close to you. You have to choose the right words, second-guess their effects, worry about not hurting your friend's feelings. Was Arts my close friend? Of course. Actually, she was the only person that still connected me to my old life.

And still I couldn't return her feelings. I knew she loved me. I might have been blind but I wasn't stupid. No idea what she could possibly have found in me. She didn't love me *because*; she loved me *despite*.

Unfortunately, I felt nothing of the kind. I could, of course, try to deceive myself just to humor her — she was a very good girl, after all — but let's face it, there was no chemistry between us. With all her obvious merits, Arts would have never become my better half.

But right now, it wasn't about me — it was about her. I just couldn't find the right words. So I spent the rest of the day avoiding her.

I investigated virtually all of Archaeth, meeting and greeting everyone who crossed my way, until I ended up at Diviner's place. For some reason, I found it easy to open up to him.

"Does that mean that we have no freedom of choice?" I asked. "Everything's predetermined, right?"

"The way I look at it, it's exactly the opposite," Diviner replied, surprised by me words. "You have all these options at your fingertips. It's up to you to select what you consider the right one."

“But what if all of them are bad? Am I supposed to select the lesser evil?”

“What do you consider a bad option?”

“The one that ends with my death.”

“They all do. Ours are the same. Me, Dreamwalker, Lidaress, DeKhat, Scrogie and all others — all the Choruls are supposed to die. You really think you’re special?”

“Of course.”

“Maybe you’re right,” he easily agreed. “The end of your journey might be different, but the result is still the same.”

I nodded. “It is indeed.”

“So you’re not ready, then?”

“A few hours ago, I wanted to find all the answers,” I replied. “But now... I’ve changed my prospective, just as you said I would. And still there’s something within me that still resists...”

“I know. That your rational mind fighting your emotional one. Your survival instinct is trying to get the upper hand. And it’s almost succeeded. But you saw it all, anyway.”

“I did,” I echoed.

“Come with me. I’m gonna show you something.”

“The machine that improves Players?”

“No. We’ll leave it till tomorrow. The Council of Voices is about to open now. It takes place every evening.”

“I thought I wasn’t allowed there?”

“You are, just this once. As my guest. Follow me.”

Much to my surprise, we headed back to the library.

No points for guessing what was about to take place there. Dozens of Choruls filled the street, beelining for the entrance. They were all greeted by my old friend the Kerian archivist. He promptly shapeshifted to adopt the appearance of every new guest, by way of paying his respects to each of them.

Funny guy. I’d only just met him but it felt like I’d known him for ages. This was one of the drawbacks of being a Chorul: I was mentally in the future, living out all of its potential scenarios at the same time, which dulled the present, making it feel less real.

I smiled to him. “Don’t sweat it.”

I watched with a strange mix of disgust and satisfaction as he shapeshifted back to his natural form of a gooey slug.

“I’m very sorry,” I said, “but I still don’t know your name.”

“It’s Ilosh Shea-Lar, the archivist replied. “Your name I know already.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“Serge, I meant to tell you something. That female friend of yours, she seems to be very sad. She spent all day reading books here. She didn’t eat anything at all.”

“Arts? Is she here?”

The gelatinous goo quivered as the creature nodded.

I cast a look at Diviner, calm and good-natured as usual. But all he said was, “We’ve got to go.”

We took a side stairwell which brought us to the very top.

Together with all the other Choruls we were standing on a giant open round platform surrounded by a low fence. The outside of this large circle was lined with a great number of much smaller ones. I started counting them but kept losing count after the first hundred. There were probably twice as many of them there.

Diviner stepped into one of those tiny circles. I remained standing to his right.

All the other Choruls were busy doing the same thing, walking around seemingly pointlessly. At a certain moment, all of them stopped, each standing within his or her own circle.

Another strange thing I noticed was that some of the circles were left empty.

A tall Abbas raised his hand. “Allow me to begin.”

He walked into the large central circle and continued, “The floor is given to the Voice of Ephet 116.”

The quill of a Chorul scribe started scraping as he began noting everything down. Should I tell him about the existence of voice recorders, maybe? Never mind. Let him suffer for his ignorance.

“World 116 is Ullum,” Diviner whispered to me. “Where the beastmen were exiled to.”

“You all know about the precarious situation in the world entrusted to Ephet 116,” the Abbas began theatrically as if this was a political debate and not a mundane report. “A number of beastmen are bent on destabilizing the world, calling for insurgence.”

‘Has their leader been identified?” one of the Choruls asked.

“He certainly has. It’s a certain Litius.”

I barely managed to stifle my indignance.

“So what’s your prognosis of it all?” another Chorul asked, frowning.

“If we don’t interfere now, in another six or seven months we’ll have a fully blown rebellion on our hands. The world’s current leaders will be overthrown, which in turn will badly affect Ullum’s political relationship with other worlds.”

“So what kind of action does Ephet 116 suggest in order to reverse the situation?”

“None yet. He says he doesn’t have enough information. He’s asking for two or three operatives with good Insight, Linguistics, and Observation Skills, who are also experts in the local vernacular. And a beastman agent to infiltrate one of the insurgents’ cells.”

“Well, we’ll have to spare them Essor, then.”

“Essor is a rhino man,” the Ullum representative replied. “I’d rather we sent Dursh.”

The Council deliberated for a while, apparently weighing up all the pros and cons, but found no objections. Then the same Chorul who’d asked about Litius’ identity raised his hand. I got the impression that he enjoyed more authority here than all the others.

“Very well,” he said to the scribe. “I want you to mark it all down: find a replacement for Dursh in world 13 and spare two more operatives for Ephet 116.”

“Ephet 116 is happy that he’s been heard,” his Voice said with a bow, then returned to his little circle.

“Is there anything else?” the same guy asked. I mentally started calling him the Chairman.

A guy from Meyer stepped forward. I was surprised how easy it was for me to guess his race. It was as if there was a voice inside me warning me that I wasn’t looking at a human being. He even gave me a long look before he started speaking.

“The floor is given to the Voice of Ephet 24. The situation in the Central Worlds is getting out of hand. They issued over thirty unrelated missions, all calling for the head of one particular Player who is currently the fifth most famous in the Interworld Network. Today, I’m incredibly happy to welcome this Player among us at this Council meeting.”

“Famous players are bound to attract attention,” the Chairman said.

“But it’s not always that their elimination calls for mercenaries in possession of Gatekeepers’ Hearts. This particular option isn’t present in my future alone. You can look for yourself.”

At that point, a very strange thing happened to me. My heart raced as if I’d just run a hundred meters. My arms chilled. My fingertips began to prickle. My thoughts rearranged, shaping a sequence of images.

It felt like a sudden surge of déjà vu, only the other way round, allowing me to see things that hadn’t yet happened.

The mercenaries were indeed very powerful. This was probably why each of them would attack me on his own, thinking that he was the one capable of completing the lucrative contract put out on me.

I saw the earlier Player from Purgator drop to his knees, croaking and spewing up blood all over the street. Admittedly, he'd already killed a good dozen Players who'd been trying to defend me. Much to their credit, they'd succeeded.

The second merc wasn't so lucky. They'd eliminated him even before he'd arrived at the scene. He was killed by one of the Purg agents who were supposed to be posted in their respective worlds — but for some reason, he'd come back to Archaeth. And had it not been for him, we would have had more than four deaths on our hands.

The last of the mercs, however, would manage to complete the job.

Unlike his colleagues, he wouldn't attack me straight away. He would wait until nightfall before breaking into my house which I'd share with some weird human mechanoid. Never mind. The merc would steal in in the dead of night and kill me with a Fire spell shaped as a magic lash.

An easy quick death.

Immediately, this particular story line parted, opening up a new perspective.

Now that I knew he was about to arrive, I counterattacked him at just the right moment. Don't ask me why. Most likely, I simply rewound time. The magic lash missed me, demolishing my house as well as a few neighboring ones. A scrap broke out — which I decided not to see through to the end because by then, I already realized that this particular scenario would end in even more deaths than the first two.

"We will go to any lengths to protect our own," the Chairman snapped.

“You won’t have to,” I said quietly.

Still, they all heard me.

After some hesitation, I headed toward the big circle. The Chorul who was already standing there stepped politely aside.

“You all know who I am,” I began. “And I know very well what you think of me. I’m a weak Player whose Avatars and whose development branch are just too powerful for him to manage. I can’t even tell you what brought my time rewind ability about. What was its purpose? To tell you the truth, I’m gonna probably take this mystery to my grave. But I’m a Time Master, in every respect. I soared high in the sky, even if for a brief moment. And in doing so, I attracted a lot of unwanted attention. But I know what we can do to ensure that the two most powerful Avatars don’t fall into hostile hands. I know how to preserve the balance in the Universe.”

The Chairman nodded. “The balance is extremely important. Especially now that the universe is hovering on the brink of war.”

“Some of you here — they know who they are — share their future with my own,” I continued. “They’re aware of one potential life line that might suit everyone as the least harmful for Choruls as well as all other Players. So after some consideration, I...”

My voice broke. To decide other people’s fates is already hard enough, but to seal your own is next to impossible.

Now I understood why Diviner had brought me here and why he wanted me to hear them out.

He wanted me to make up my mind. To take the only possible decision.

“...upon some consideration, I’ve decided to choose the scenario where only one Player will die.”

No, they didn’t break into a round of applause. They didn’t rush off toward me to give me a pat on the shoulder. They didn’t shout my name.

As far as they were concerned, I’d done the right thing. My decision was perfectly normal for them. Anyone of them would have done the same.

Admittedly, the Chairman thanked me for my brave choice. He repeated what Diviner had already said: that no one’s forcing me to do anything, that the decision was entirely mine, blah blah.

As soon as he’d stopped talking, I knew that the issue was closed. The Voice of Ephet 24 left the circle and headed back to his place.

I looked around me, desperately trying to get my bearings. I had no idea where I’d been standing earlier on. The weak local sun was already touching the horizon, unable to illuminate anything.

I searched for Diviner, trying to make out his carrot head in the crowd — but there were four red-haired humans here. Were they having a redheads’ convention here? Trying to appear composed, I stepped aside and took one of the empty little circles, preparing to listen.

Admittedly, of all the subjects they discussed, only two deserved close attention, namely the upcoming beastman uprising in Ullum and the equally looming hunt of yours truly. All the other points of their agenda were basically just status reports. Can you imagine gathering here every night just to listen to this drivel? I just hoped the “Voices” had some perks for representing the other worlds’ supervisors. Like the right to drive around flashing your blues ’n twos, or jumping the line in shops.

That wasn’t really fair of me, to tell you the truth. The whole meeting lasted half an hour at the most. Just some friendly banter before dinner.

In the end, I'd actually fallen so deep in thought that I hadn't even noticed it was over. When I'd come round, the valiant Choruls were already leaving the platform.

Diviner, however, was heading toward me. Not his usual calm good-natured self: this Diviner looked quite disturbed.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Didn't you hear? The war's drawing near."

"I thought you guys were experts at this."

"Not in this case, no. I suppose you could call it the last war."

"Wanna tell me more about it?"

"Don't you want to speak to your girlfriend first, tell her what you already know?"

"She's not my girlfriend. Just a friend. So I don't think a couple of minutes would matter. What was it you said about the war?"

"What do you know about the origins of the Universe?" he asked me instead.

"Well, where I'm coming from, some people think it's God who started all this. Others keep talking about the Big Bang Theory. But now that I've become a Player, I have a funny feeling they're all wrong."

"On the contrary. They're all right, each in their own way. Okay. Try to imagine the existence of three absolute powers. All of them sentient. All of them wise. And unbelievably powerful."

I smiled. "So it *is* God, after all?"

“That’s a primitive concept. But if it’s easier for you this way, okay, let them be Gods. Or even better, three Brothers.”

“Nothing like divine family squabbles.”

“They’re not a family. They’re not even related. But that’s irrelevant. For a while, they used to exist independently from each other. Until the original Nascence.”

“Nascence of what?”

“Of everything. Of the Universe. The first Brother created all the worlds as we know them, both inhabited and dead ones. The second Brother followed his example, only he placed his worlds into a different dimension which until now has never come into contact with ours. But the third Brother was wise enough not to compete with them in originality. He took the Universe made by the first Brother and created his own within it.”

“Wait a sec. I think I’m beginning to understand now. He created Players?”

“Exactly. He created the Game and its system. He also created Players and Gatekeepers: the former as eternal wanderers destined to add depth and variety to the worlds built by the first Brother, and the latter entrusted with supervising the Game, ensuring its flawless performance.”

“That’s awesome,” I said, and I really meant it. His theory might have used a bit of hard science, but it wasn’t any worse than the story of a white-bearded old man watching us from atop a fluffy cloud. “So what’s the problem, then?”

“The problem was, the two dimensions created by the first two brothers were never supposed to come into contact with each other. Probably. We’re not really sure. But they did, and it really screwed up things. The first world that suffered from that encounter was Atrain.”

“Wait a sec. So those horrible betentacled monsters come from a different dimension?”

“Unfortunately so. Before, they couldn’t really survive here. Physically it just wasn’t possible. But they still managed to break in somehow and even began to adapt. And now it’s not only Atrain that’s under threat. There’ve been registered sightings at Qird and Calon too. This is war. They don’t come here to offer their friendship.”

“Well, you should summon those gods again then, shouldn’t you?”

“That’s a very primitive concept, as I say. You can shout all you want — they’re everywhere,” he swept his hands around. “At least two of them are. They’re here and over there, in you and in me. They’ve filled the entire universe with their presence. They don’t live on their own anymore. They’re present in all of the worlds and beings that they created.”

“But what about Gatekeepers? The way I understood it, they seem to have some kind of weapon against the intruders.”

“From our experience, the Gatekeepers have become too set in their ways. Over millennia, their minds have fossilized, turning them into some sort of robots who do everything by the book. They’re unable to depart from the rules. They can be painful to talk to sometimes. Besides, they’re very few.”

“But what about you? Surely you won’t just stand by and watch?”

“Absolutely not. That’s exactly what I’m doing, trying to resolve this problem. Which is why our life lines have met in the first place.”

“Listen, man, your sun has already set, and I can’t see anything in this damned darkness. Just spit it out.”

“When you escaped one of the neighboring worlds lately — I’m talking about Hist — you apparently picked up something there that means

a lot to me. It’s called a minor DNA transmutator. We would like to ask you to—”

Without waiting for him to finish, I reached into my inventory and placed the pretty useless little box before him.

With a bow, Diviner gingerly accepted it — like a medieval Japanese courtier bowing to the Emperor. “You’ve no idea how much you’ve just done for our victory.”

“You bet I don’t. I have no intention to. I just don’t have the time. Could you please point me to the stairs? I can’t see jack in this darkness.”

He gently steered me toward the staircase. Its walls were studded with glowing crystals, thinning out the gloom.

We walked downstairs in silence, knowing we’ve said everything we had to say. And even more.

“When are you going to do it?” Diviner asked once we’d reached the bottom of the stairs.

“Tomorrow. Early in the morning. The sooner it happens the better.”

“I always liked the human race. There’s something very special about you.”

“I take it as a compliment. Till next time.”

“See you tomorrow. By the way, do you know whose circle you took earlier at the Council?”

“Sure. The one meant for the Voice of Ephet 76. Who strangely enough doesn’t exist.”

Diviner nodded. “Exactly,” he said with a soft smile, then shuffled off back home.

I found Arts in the reading room, fast asleep on top of a large and apparently soft folio. The archivist slug was there too. His jellified body quivered as he saw me, but I motioned him to stay put.

I walked over to the sleeping girl and stroked her back — gently, as you would caress a small child. Strangely enough, the touch awoke her. Probably, she wasn’t really used to this sort of thing.

“Arts, I’ve brought you to the most mysterious place in the whole Universe, and here you are sleeping.”

“You shouldn’t have run off,” she snapped back. “You followed your Diviner around like a bad smell.”

“I needed to sort out a few things. About myself as well.”

“So are you done now?”

“Absolutely. I know it all now.”

“You gonna tell me?”

“That’s why I’ve come to see you. I now know the name of the Chorul I killed. The one who helped me become a Player.”

“Come on then, spit it out.”

“His name is Sergei Demidov, Arts. That Chorul... it was me.”

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Chapter 29

TO HAVE ABSOLUTE CONFIDENCE in what you're doing, you have to be either a religious fanatic or an idiot. An intelligent person capable of critical thinking will inevitably doubt his own self-righteousness, however justified.

Especially when you're about to tell someone close that you're about to part ways.

Skeptical as I was of shrinks of any kind, on that particular day they proved their worth to me, as Arts went through almost all of the stages of breakup grief: denial, anger, bargaining and depression. All but acceptance, that is.

At first, she tried to tell me that it was all my imagination and wishful thinking. Then she shouted at me, yelling that I couldn't do something like that to her and to all of them. Then she tried to delay the inevitable as I did my best to reason with her — but all my urging and persuading fell on deaf ears.

Finally, she fell silent and clammed up.

"How sure are you this is what you think it is?" she resumed from square one.

"Arts, I saw it with my own eyes. When you become a Chorul, you'll be able to *feel* all these things too. Then you'll understand me."

She just shook her head.

“Arts, all my earlier actions have been bringing me to this moment. Do you remember the second dagger that went missing?”

I produced my Moon Steel dagger. Arts cast a grim look at it.

“We found it in Purgator, remember? Litius picked it up from Pull’s body and gave it to me. Two matching knives, identical to the last scratch. And then one of them disappeared. Like it was stolen or something.”

She didn’t say a word, so I was obliged to continue,

“This is called temporal dissent. When I ended up having both items, one of them disappeared, pushed further back into the past, while I kept the one that had been obtained exactly where it was supposed to be. Same thing happened with the Repelling Stone dropped by one of the Horsemen.”

Arts perked up. “Wait a sec. Didn’t you say that Lidaress had managed to track you down using three items? There you go! That mirror, you didn’t just stumble across it, did you? Nor did you pick it up as loot.”

“Exactly. I’ve just bought it, here,” I said, producing the mirror. “In a local shop. And I’ve just had the trench coat ordered, so that I could find it — in the past. The tailor says it’ll be ready by the morning.”

Arts ground her teeth. “Who the hell are you doing this for? For *them?*”

“I’m doing it for the sake of all commoners. And Players. This is the pinnacle of everything I’ve learned in my brief stint as a Player. I should have guessed earlier. When the Oracle died. He laid down his life so that I could kill Talsian. Just think of it: a creature that ancient and powerful sacrificed himself to save the lives of mere commoners. Because he didn’t consider his life more important than that of others. Hunter did the same thing, both for me and for Cesspit’s sake. And Traug. I should have realized it before I made such a mess of it. It took me so many deaths to realize a

very simple thing. And to hold myself accountable. But now I’m here — and I know what to do. For the first time in my life, my purpose is clear. All I need is to take a few actions.”

“You’re an idiot!” Arts shouted. She pushed me away and ran out of the reading room, leaving me alone.

I didn’t chase after her. Probably because I had nothing to add to what I’d already said. We simply needed to live through this stage. As simple as that.

Without delay, I sat down and started writing a letter to Diviner. A new Diviner whom I didn’t know yet. I left him detailed instructions and drew his attention to the three items that had allowed Lidaress to track me down. I even took the trouble of copying their ID numbers to make sure he got them right. I also listed the main reference points which would allow him to monitor my progress.

I spent a good couple of hours on it, if not more. Letter writing had never been my forte.

By the time I left the library, it was late at night. The silence was absolute. Normally, even in the remotest of villages you can still hear the chirping of crickets or the serene babbling of a river flowing past. But here, the thunderous stomping of my boots was the only sound.

Still, I needed to see someone who still wasn’t asleep at this hour. Because they didn’t need sleep, did they? Probably not.

Just as I’d expected, the Gatekeeper was at his post, leaning on his sword. He cast me an indifferent glance.

Never mind. I have a couple of aces up my sleeve that just might surprise you, Mister.

I reached into my inventory with both hands, producing the Heart and the Gatekeepers' sword.

His reaction exceeded my wildest expectations. He instantly sprang into a combat stance.

I laid the Heart and the sword on the floor, placing the latter hilt forward to dispel any doubts of my peaceful intentions from his mind.

"One of your Brothers might need this," I said. "I won't need them any longer."

You've helped the Gatekeepers.
You've received a new title: Enlightened.
Allows you to visit the Central Tower in Anchor World

Great news. Shame I won't have the time to do it.

For a couple of seconds, the Gatekeeper stared at the items. Then he picked both up.

"Thank you, Player," he said. "An extra Heart means an extra Gatekeeper. A sword reinforced with Inturia is an extra dead intruder from the dark dimension."

Finally I got him talking! When I'd first started out as a Player, I couldn't get as much as a yes or no out of them. And now these dudes were singing like nightingales. Now that I had a title and a Fame to match, the Gatekeepers' fabled aura of mystique seemed to have evaporated.

"I hope it all works out for you. This isn't my war," I said before bidding my farewell.

Was I imagining the cunning squint in his eye? Still, I was too preoccupied with other things to worry about it. My full focus was on the

next day’s events. Even without asking Diviner, I had a funny feeling that nothing like this had ever happened before.

I was about to initiate a Player who was in fact myself. Still, I clearly saw it, both sensing and understanding the inevitability of it.

That was funny. I never considered myself smart. Looking back at my life, I could say with all confidence that it had been but a sequence of most embarrassing blunders. Most often, I did things I didn’t even want to do, just to spite others, even my own father. I’d never appreciated my family, thinking I still had a lifetime to look forward to. I’d never worried about tomorrow; I simply went with the flow, not even trying to grab at a tree branch overhanging the approaching rapids. I’d been whittling away the time, pointlessly and uselessly, finding consolation in the fact that I was no different from many. All of us going round in circles like circus ponies, not even trying to escape the eternal groundhog day. Groping our way to work every day, still half-asleep, trying to make some money to prolong the agony of our existence. Gossiping over the water cooler about those who dared to go their own way, in an attempt to justify our own existence. Living on a diet of microwaved takeaway dinners in front of yet another mindless sitcom. Then going back to bed, oblivious of our own misery...

If Diviner were to be believed, a certain powerful creature had cared enough to give us the gift of life. Cared enough to create everything out of nothing. Which got me thinking: if indeed that awesome being had known how His children would squander the lucky ticket they’d received, hadn’t He ever wondered if His entire effort had been worth it?

The silent night city was a perfect backdrop for these kinds of sentiments. The silence was deafening, my thoughts thundering in my head as if I’d shouted them inside a small, empty, echoing room...

I did my calculations. It had been just over a month since the commoner known as Sergei Demidov had become a Player known as Serge. Forty days, to be precise. A very mystical number.

Still, I immediately corrected myself: it would be forty-one days tomorrow. A minor correction, but important nevertheless. In my case, time was a valuable resource which required extreme handling care.

My feet brought me back to the library on their own accord. I went upstairs. Only a few hours ago, as the Council discussed its agenda, the top platform had been heaving with activity. And now there was only one Player left standing in the vast open space.

One Chorul.

I leaned my back down onto the cold flagstones. Surprisingly, I felt at peace with myself. For the first time in the last couple of years, I experienced satisfaction with what I did. I felt needed, like a tiny cog in a giant mechanism that puts the whole thing into motion.

That's how I must have fallen asleep: my eyes still shut, my face relaxed into a smile.

My awakening was urgent. Diviner was shaking me by the shoulder, gently but insistently.

The new dawn, golden as honey and smooth like treacle, was smearing itself over the sky. The world of Archaeth was awakening from its sleep, slowly filling with sound.

I stretched, realizing that even my new divine identity as a Chorul had failed to work a miracle. My back was stiff and achy from lying on cold stones. My fingers were stiff and frozen. Overall, my body refused to obey, to the point where Diviner was obliged to help me back to my feet.

"Everything's ready," he said. "I'm not sure it's gonna work as expected, though. It's been a while since we used the machine. And I can't see anything in my future that mentions it."

“You know very well that it can happen,” I reassured him. “I don’t have to tell you that you can’t see every single event in a particular life line. Only the most crucial ones that affect you directly. You’re far too experienced not to know it. Don’t worry. I know it’s all gonna work. The only problem is, I don’t remember the way.”

“Follow me, then.”

Now he really managed to surprise me. We left the main city and continued down a flat slope. The cold morning air woke me up better than a cup of coffee. Wonder if those robes of theirs were warm? If they were woolen, I wouldn’t say no to one of them right now.

Diviner walked in silence. I, however, still had another important question left to ask him,

“Have you ever wondered what’s gonna happen to the universe?” I asked him. “After I’ve done what I’m about to do? Provided there’s still a universe.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, if I rewind time and die, then tomorrow won’t come, correct?”

He frowned. “I thought about this. Technically, you’re right. But there’s something else to it, too. Both me and all the other Choruls have seen a future which would come *after* you’ve done your bit. Which means the world will go on. Why so? I’m not ready to answer this right now. It’s possible that He who created the universe won’t allow us to obliterate it. Because you’re only a Player. You’re His creation. You may have found a loophole in the rulebook but that doesn’t mean he’s gonna stop the world from turning just to humor a single ant in an anthill.”

He paused, looking at me, then continued, “Personally, I think that even if the world does stop, He’ll simply troubleshoot it and restart it.”

In saying so, he swept his hands around him, as if his God was everywhere at once. A human being would have probably pointed a finger at the sky instead.

I nodded. “Troubleshoot it, yes. By erasing me and everything related to me, including my Avatars and the time rewind ability. To make sure that no Savior/Time Master can resurface in the foreseeable future. Good. I’m perfectly happy with this.”

By then, we’d advanced far enough from the city. I couldn’t see a single roof in the distance. Diviner walked over to a cliff and waved his hand, motioning me to follow, then disappeared down below.

It took me a while to discover a hole cut through the rock. I had to get down on all fours in order to get through.

And once I climbed in, I froze speechless.

A real full-size sarcophagus rested on the rock floor. Two of its sides were covered with a thick layer of dust. It was dimly illuminated by tiny living blobs of purple light hovering in mid-air.

“What’s this now for a charade?” I demanded, indignant. “You gonna bury me here like some freaking Snow White? And what’s with all the secrecy?”

“We have our reasons for that,” Diviner replied. “The machine you saw earlier, the Revelator, is perfectly safe for Players, which is why we use it for initiations. But Liberator is a whole other story entirely...”

“Why, did it kill anyone?”

He didn’t appreciate my irony. “The machine should be working properly,” he said after a pause. “According to Chronos’ notes, it should allow a Player to unblock his or her development branch. That’s all it’s

supposed to do. But we had so many cases of people going insane after using it that the Council decreed to destroy it."

"It looks like someone disobeyed the order, did they?"

"That's because I saw my own future. In it, I received a message from a Chorul who arrived unexpectedly and disappeared immediately afterward. After a while, he was supposed to reappear. I also saw this machine that you need so badly now. So I did what I thought was the right thing."

I gave him an encouraging tap on the shoulder. "You did it right. Let's stop whining and try to activate this thing. How do you start it?"

"It's already started," he said, pushing the lid of the sarcophagus aside.

Inside was a rather comfortable bed with a head support and some leather straps. Just as I loved it. The only thing missing was a gag.

There was a problem though. Even before I could climb in, I could already see that my "crystal coffin" was indeed meant for Snow White and not a fully grown Korl boy. My knees got stuck halfway, preventing the lid from closing. I was obliged to assume the pose of a praying embryo about to jump out of the womb. Or whatever.

Finally, the lid slid into its place. The sarcophagus began to vibrate. I heard a low hum.

I prepared for the worst. You may be a Chorul capable of seeing all potential future scenarios at once (and admittedly none of them had said anything about me croaking inside this Liberator machine) — but still I sensed a slight tension of the body part which had once used to house a prehensile tail.

It lasted for a few excruciatingly long minutes. Then everything fell silent.

Had it failed? Had the machine got broken? What the hell had happened?

The lid slid aside, revealing Diviner's anxious face. I could smell something burning.

"You all right?" the Chorul asked, untying me.

"Sort of. Might have to live with this trauma for the rest of my life though. Ought to sleep with a light from now on. Why, didn't it work?"

"I think it did. Go and check it."

I opened my interface.

Everything seemed to be the same. Nothing had changed. Development branch: Time Master. Sounded a bit ironic, given the circumstances.

That was the extent of it.

No, wait. What's that little scroll bar below?

I touched it. It seemed to work. Five seconds... six... eight... with every new second, the number on the right seemed to grow.

Aha. It meant that the ability's cooldown would grow with each activation — reaching some impressive numbers in the end. When I scrolled all the way down to the mark saying, "41 days", the number next to it showed fifty-something years, no less.

That would make you think twice before activating it!

"What can you see?" Diviner asked impatiently.

“Everything’s fine. Your contraption from hell seems to be working. We’ve hacked my development branch. I can go back to the past.”

“Well, then—”

“Well, then we’re parting ways. No, wait a sec.”

I emptied my inventory, handing him everything I had. I even removed my torn and patched magic trench coat. I kept only three items: the Moon Steel dagger, the magic mirror and the Repelling Stone.

“You can discard them or even burn them, I don’t care,” I said. “Let’s go.”

We climbed out.

Diviner didn’t say anything. I knew what he must have felt. It’s not easy to accompany a friend to a sure death. No amount of words can help here. But parting ways without saying anything is arguably even worse.

Luckily for Diviner, we were expected.

I’d thought something like that might happen. Arts would never leave anything to chance.

“Well, Serge, I hope it all works out for you,” Diviner said, officious and shy at the same time.

‘Thanks, man. Thanks for everything.”

We gave each other a brief hug: a quick slap on the back, and it was over.

Diviner hurried back uphill, carrying my stuff. I only had three artifacts left in my inventory, plus the clothes on my back. But I was least

interested in what was left of my bygone riches. What was I supposed to say to Arts?

Her face seemed to have faded overnight. Her eyes had sunken. Her skin was tinted gray. Her gaze was so dull as if she was several thousand years old, at least. That's the kind of gaze you only see in ancient old people who've long outlived themselves.

I breathed in the cold air and closed my eyes, rejuvenated by a new vision.

I was a little boy again, about three years old, standing outside in a winter street watching the pristine sheet of white snow that covered the earth. I was trying to catch snowflakes with my mouth. I had only one thing to be afraid of: that this grim lady nearby would start berating me. And I was so fed up with it all.

"You don't have to do what Diviner says," Arts said unexpectedly.

I startled and looked at her, trying hard to suppress a smile.

She was anxious, freezing and in a foul mood. She had no idea how the council worked and was still clutching to straws hoping to save me. She was probably thinking I'd been told to do what I was about to do.

Very well, let her think so. I was too tired to start explaining it all from scratch.

"Diviner's words reveal the will of all the others," I said. "And they're right. The council is unanimous in regards of this matter."

"But don't you understand? It means you're gonna die!"

"We're all gonna die someday. Even gods are mortal. Whether you live for a year, or ten years, or even a thousand, the outcome is always the same. The question is, how our death can affect the lives of others."

“But why do you have to leave me?” she fell upon me, beating me with her fists.

I grabbed her by the wrists. She didn’t fight back. She clung to my chest and dissolved into tears. “What will I do without you?”

“You? You’ll only become the greatest and most powerful of all the Choruls. One day, you’re gonna replace one of the Ephets. Or you might go to some other worlds where we’re needed.”

No idea how long we stayed like that. Her smell tried to bring me back to life. Tried to revive the dead man standing in front of her. This was probably the worst and the hardest ordeal of them all.

Still, in the end the notions of duty and purpose outweighed my will to live.

“I see you by the Gates in half an hour?” I asked.

“I’m already there,” she said, easing herself away from me.

She tried to smile but dissolved in another bout of tears. So she turned away and headed uphill toward the Gatehouse.

“I can see that,” I mouthed, taking a peek into the future.

Then I walked back toward the city.

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Chapter 30

WHAT IS IT ABOUT DEATH that scares us so badly? Is it the fact that all our physiological functions are about to shut down? Hardly. It's probably the complete lack of any knowledge about it that we're afraid of. We're scared of the unknown. Normally, we have a decent idea of what is about to happen in our lives, enough to second-guess the potential outcomes and allow for all eventualities. Death, however, doesn't afford us this luxury. We die having no idea of what's about to happen — that's provided there is something to happen at all.

Thus thinking, I approached the shop of DeKhat, the local artifact maker. Outside of the archivist slug, he was arguably the most wondrous creature here. Admittedly humanoid, he'd modified his body in the most bizarre ways that would make any mechanoid cry with envy. Apparently, he was a devoted spider fan, believing their anatomy to be as perfect as an organic body could possibly get. Which had prompted him to go to Hist, of all places, where his barely alive frame was later discovered by the Choruls. He'd survived the experience — but his penchants for spiders hadn't gone anywhere.

This could probably explain his six bionic legs which allowed him to move around the room at an enviable speed. He would scurry toward what looked like a very ancient cubic object, only to disappear again in search of yet another tool.

"Oh hi," he said, perking up on seeing me. "Did you see what they brought me? It's just as powerful as a quarter of an ounce of tartum from the central world. If it goes up, it'll be curtains."

“DeKhat, I’ve come to get my order.”

“Sure, sure. I’ll go get it straight away. If only I had more time! Then again, what do you care, hehe! But not everyone can afford to lead such unlinear lives as you do...” his voice trailed away as he realized the significance of the visit. “Wait a sec. Are you... are you *leaving*?”

“I am indeed.”

“By the holy crocuses of Velchoir, is it that time already? I didn’t expect it to happen so soon. No, please don’t get me wrong. Every Chorul must be ready to leave on their last voyage. You guys seem to take it for granted, so I—”

“Sorry, DeKhat, but I need my order.”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

He hurried off into the depths of his shop. I could hear the clatter of things falling off the shelves. Finally he reemerged with a small cloth bundle in his hands.

“Here’s what you asked for. Perfectly adaptable to the wearer’s level. For a middle-class mage. I could have made it stronger, you know, that way you’d have had God-class clothes. You know that our facilities are good enough for that now.”

“That’s a bit over the top,” I said. “It’s good as it is. Thanks a lot, DeKhat.”

“Wait,” he scurried toward me and proffered his hand. “Good luck.”

As soon as I walked outside, I literally sensed the surreptitious presence of a good fifty Choruls who’d all come to see me on my way. I forced myself not to turn toward them, pretending it was nothing out of the

ordinary. Instead, I headed for the other Gatehouse, the farthest of the two, accompanied by a cool breeze and lots of mourning gazes.

There were two Gatehouses in Archaeth: one to get in and the other to get out. No idea why they needed this system. The other Gatehouse stood completely by itself, if you didn't count the rickety hut of some old Orc Chorul whose name I couldn't remember.

Arts was already there, waiting. She looked vacant like a mother who'd just heard the news of her son's death — but I could see she was on the brink of tears.

My inner calm shifted, giving way to pity, heavy and oppressive. In order to shake it off, I got busy with all the last-moment preparations.

I stripped naked, completely unfazed by Arts' presence, and folded my clothes neatly on the floor. The Gatekeeper had no need for them, so the Choruls might come and retrieve them later.

I shuddered, shifting my bare feet on the stone floor. It wasn't really cold, just unpleasant.

"Can you cast some clothes for me?" I asked Arts. "You know I'm not big on magic."

Tears welled in her eyes, about to drip from her long eyelashes. Still, she managed to restrain herself enough to cast a spell. She handed me her work: a long, flowing hooded cloak and a pair of high boots.

I put them on and double-checked all the artifacts before putting them away. After some hesitation, I took a small amount of dust, just enough for my fare plus something for Serge — the *new* Serge — to get him started.

Now everything was ready.

“No pants, but a great cloak,” I joked, feeling quite uncomfortable without any underwear.

“What am I gonna do now—” Arts cut herself short. Tears rained down her cheeks.

I walked over to her and gave her a hug, doing my best not to follow suit. Normally, one can get quite sentimental when visualizing one’s death. You just can’t help being sorry for yourself. But right now, I was sorry for her, not for myself. Dragging it out would only make matters worse.

So I eased myself away, gently but firmly. “Please go now,” I said. “It’ll be better that way.”

She looked up at me one last time, then headed for the exit, staggering slightly as she walked. Shuddering and sniffing her nose.

I turned toward the Gatekeeper, simply to avoid looking at her.

Now. Let’s reset the slider at 41 days from now. No, less, otherwise I’d be forced to wait there until early morning. Like this... much better. Come on now...

[∞]

I was standing in the same Gatehouse. But the shadows had shifted, falling at an unusual angle.

The Gatekeeper was different too. I just sensed it within me.

The Orc Chorul was sitting on the porch of his hut. I still couldn’t remember his name. Not that I needed it. I motioned him to approach.

“Who are you?” he asked, walking over to me.

Being a Chorul must feel real strange. You know the future. You've seen it. And still you're obliged to ask the same old questions.

"I'm the Voice of Ephet 76."

"Seventy-six?" he repeated, rummaging his memory for my name.

"Will you please take this," I said, handing him the letter I'd worded so laboriously the night before. No, scratch that: forty nights from now. "Could you please make sure Diviner gets it?"

The Orc most have still had lots of questions to ask me. Still, he obediently took the folded sheets of parchment.

I turned my head toward the Gatekeeper and heaved a doomed sigh. "I need to go to Cesspit, to a place called Threshold."

"You know that this Gate doesn't have a return option, do you?"

"I do. Security measure. But I don't intend to come back."

"Your last voyage?" the Gatekeeper asked. Surprisingly, his voice rang with sympathy.

I nodded, then added after some deliberation,

"I have traveled a lot between worlds and I often wondered who Gatekeepers really were. But I couldn't find the answer anywhere. Maybe you can tell me? Now. Just before my last voyage. Who are you?"

"We are the spawn of the Game. We are those who brought it into being. We are the ones it needs."

"That's too generic, I'm afraid. Are you Players?"

“We used to be. And then... we just became Gatekeepers. We’re a bit like you, to an extent.”

“Only we find ourselves at opposite poles.”

“No,” he shook his head. “If anything, our understanding of reality is on a different plane. You believe that the worlds need equilibrium. We place our hopes on the connectivity within the interworld network, whatever it might bring. That’s the difference between us.”

“No good me trying to compete with your rhetoric.”

He nodded. “That would be rather imprudent.”

“Let’s leave it till later, then. It’s time for me to leave.”

“As you wish, Chorul.”

How did he find out? Even the Orc had been quite surprised to see me. We were indeed Players above all — but Gatekeepers were something totally different.

Shame I’d never live to find out.

I threw a pinch of dust into the stone bowl. Instead of dropping down, the little particles froze in mid-air, starting their swirling motion.

I touched the altar, and so did he: a monstrous creature clad in full armor.

The next moment, the silence of the constantly overcast Archaeth was shattered by the pandemonium of Cesspit.

This Gatehouse was different. I’d never been here before. Apparently, they had backups, but what for? Somehow I didn’t think it was done for the

Choruls' convenience. This was probably done for Gatekeepers' own needs. Did every city have one? Good question.

I checked the map and headed for the Order's residence.

Prague wasn't very warm — by the commoners' standards, of course. Still, my summoned robes didn't let the cold in. I was too preoccupied thinking about my upcoming exchange with the Grand Master.

What a strange feeling. Having selected this particular life line, I'd already lived it out, so the events of the next day stood clearly in my mind. I didn't even need to look for the right words.

The entrance was guarded by regular humans — trained professionals sworn to secrecy. The fencing master Oliverio, a.k.a. Artan, stood with them too, still alive and in one piece.

I wasn't afraid of him recognizing me. The hood concealed part of my face; besides, I'd become considerably shaggier since he'd first seen me.

"I need to see the Grand Master," I said.

Oliverio cast a studying look over me. "Who are you?"

"I'm a Chorul. I am the voice of Ephet 76, from Archaeth."

This moniker proved to be more effective than a door key. After a brief wait under the guards' watchful eyes, Oliverio reappeared, considerably more reverent.

"The Grand Master will see you now."

He took me through the lavishly decorated building, past dozens of Seers, many of whom were about to die very soon. Finally, I faced the Order's leader.

“Chorul,” the Grand Master said in surprise. He looked much better than I remembered him. “Fancy seeing you here! Have you come to tell me something?”

“There’re lots of things I’d like to tell you. For example, that in order to confuse me, you decided to see me here and not upstairs as usual. I could also tell you that the Magister is now listening into our every word in the secret room next door. Or I could tell you that I’ve arrived with an important proposition, next to which all your little tricks would pale into insignificance. So what do you want me to tell you, *Numa?*”

Our conversation didn’t last long. That’s how it always happens when you know exactly what you want and come up with all the right words.

The Seers were actually a decent bunch. They were interested in maintaining the balance here in Cesspit just as much as I was. Besides, to be completely honest, the news of the Destroyer’s imminent arrival did the trick — even though admittedly, Numa was shaken to the bone. Never mind. Once he’d recovered from the news, he would realize that at the cost of few lives, he could save thousands.

With that behind me, I headed straight for the familiar Community. It was seething with life and activity, oblivious of the dead man that was passing through it.

I glanced at a flying port circling the sky and smiled, remembering the terror of my first flight. I walked warily past Players of every imaginable race, trying not to attract unwanted attention to myself.

Finally, I got to the Gatehouse.

This Gatekeeper wasn’t as talkative as his predecessor. Having said that, I wasn’t in a chatty mood myself. I just poured some dust into the bowl, and said the word that sounded like home:

“Sorrow.”

How strange. I thought that I'd never come back here. But here I was, back in my home city.

I hurried to exit the Community and beelined for the bus stop. I got on a bus and took a window seat, looking at the wintry city. The locals almost didn't bother noticing me. Even the conductor walked past me. As I stared at the cold streets still free from snow, a lump formed in my throat as it fully dawned on me what was about to come to pass.

This is what normally happens when someone dear to you dies. At first, we just can't take it in. We keep going through the motions as rationally as we can, carrying on with our lives. But after a while, it suddenly hits you. On your way to work, or on vacation, or even during a doctor's appointment, wherever. This was what was happening to me now.

I very nearly missed my stop and was obliged to make a dash for it at the last moment. Once I'd got my breath back and got a grip, I looked around me. The area was virtually deserted. It was a work day, after all.

I started walking in the right direction, occasionally glancing at the map. Aha. Here's the industrial zone, the woodland park and the faint trail snaking through it.

I pulled out the bundle containing my brand new magic trench coat and placed it on the well-worn trail, then stepped aside and hid behind the tree.

The little demon came hopping and skipping, heading back to his lair. He suddenly stopped, sniffing the air as he neared the spot where I'd left the package. He went down on all fours just in front of it, poked it with a hoof and instantly snatched it back. He waited up a little, then scooped up the bundle and pressed it to his chest.

I came out of my hiding place so he could see me and whistled softly.

The demon pricked up his ears and turned around, looking for the source of the sound, as he ducked, crouching close to the ground.

I pulled out the knife and showed it to him, while whistling a little louder. The demon bolted back to his lair, hugging his trophy, while I headed back to the bus.

This part of my job was done.

I climbed into a shiny brand new Nefaz bus, running into some old lady in doing so. This earned me a good whack of her cane and a few quality f-words. Old ladies don't care whether you're a Player, a Chorul, or God himself. I withdrew to the back seat, hoping she would soon forget all about me. Which she did. Good.

The sight of my home street provoked a light bout of nostalgia. The shawarma joint, the corner shop, the street lights about to flicker on; passersby bustling to and fro.

I wasn't in a hurry. I still had plenty of time.

Unhurriedly I reached my front door. Professor was sitting on the bench in his usual drunken state. He nodded to me — out of sheer politeness, I suppose, as he couldn't have recognized me. I was obliged to nod back.

I dialed my apartment's code on the interphone. I only used it rarely when I forgot my keys.

I entered the hallway and walked toward Hunter's apartment. I pressed the doorbell with a shaking finger as I shrugged off my hood.

He was alive. He was standing before me. For the first time in these past few weeks, I just wanted to give it all the finger.

The thought flashed through my head and disappeared as I realized it wasn't going to happen. I'd throw in the towel, and what next? What would happen to me now that I'd traveled to my own past? Two identities could only exist simultaneously as long as one of them was a Player and the other a commoner. So what would happen if I refused to close the circuit of time?

On the one hand, no one was going to die. Everybody would be perfectly happy. On the other, why couldn't I see that particular future among the many? Could it be because it didn't even exist? Or could there be no future at all, whatsoever?

Diviner had told me about similar temporal paradoxes. No one can really change the set course of events. It had taken me all this time to realize that. All I'd been doing was trying to cushion my fall, ironing out any potential plot holes.

Too late to worry about them now. The die had been cast.

I looked into the eyes of the Player standing before me. "Hello, Hunter."

* * *

"Very well," Hunter said. "I agree."

"Take this," I said, handing him the mirror and the dagger. "I want you to give these to him."

Then we parted, my mentor and I. One dead man bidding a silent farewell to the other. A brief handshake, then he was off back home, while I headed for the local supermarket.

Which was where I found Boris who was already heading back home.

"Hi Boris," I said.

“Hi,” he said, his gaze distrustful.

“On your way home?”

“Yeah.”

“For sure you don’t know where I know you from?”

He nodded warily.

“I’m your guardian wizard. I’ve been watching you for a long time. I know that you go to that school over there. You Mom’s called Lydia, and your Dad’s name is Victor. You’ve got a little brother but he’s still very young. He’s only just been born. And I also know,” I added, switching to a conspiratorial whisper. “Last winter you and other boys went rafting. And you fell in the water. The other boys started a bonfire to warm you up and dry your stuff out. Your Mom never even found out.”

Boris opened his eyes wide. “How do you know?”

“I already told you. I’m your guardian wizard. I know everything about you.”

“Wizard, yeah right! Pull the other one!”

This is what I love about our new generation. That take nothing at face value. They want evidence.

I raised my hand and cast a minor Wave of Fire.

Flames glowed in the night, enveloping my fingers. Boris stared in fascination, utterly convinced.

“Would you like to become a wizard?” I asked.

He nodded enthusiastically. “You bet.”

“Come with me, then.”

“My mom’s waiting for me,” the boy said haltingly.

“It’s all right. Your neighbor will come and get you in a moment. Uncle Sergei.”

I pulled the boy by the hand. He reluctantly followed.

No idea what was going on in his head right now. True, this was quite a foul trick on my part — but I hoped that my little next-door neighbor might learn from this experience and wouldn’t so lightly agree to strangers’ invitations anymore.

Besides, very soon he’d be placed in the watchful care of Bumpkin, my trusty house goblin.

“Do we really need to go there?” Boris asked warily when we stopped at the foundation pit’s edge.

“The magic field is really good down there,” I lied. “Come. Don’t be afraid.”

I felt ill at ease. Not because of what was about to happen, but because of Boris who was restless and admittedly scared. It really put me on edge.

Never mind. Everything would be over soon. A bit more patience, that’s all.

I showed Boris a couple more magic tricks, then made a few familiar movements with my hand — familiar but different at the same time.

You’ve created a new spell: Light

How can you possibly create something that’s already been created? Don’t ask. Or maybe I couldn’t “gain” it this time because I’d already gained it once before?

I heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

“Whatever happens, don’t be afraid. Take this,” I shoved the Repelling Stone into his pocket.

“Boris! Boris!” a voice came from above.

“That’s Uncle Sergei,” I whispered. “Answer him.”

“I’m over here!”

“Boris, where are you?”

So that’s what my voice sounded like? Awful. It felt like seeing myself in a video.

Never mind. Time to take care of the really important stuff.

Would you like to renounce the Divine Avatar: Guide?

This was Hunter’s legacy — but I’d never activated it because by then, I’d ceased being a Player of Light.

Talking about which, what would happen if I tried to use it — or Destroyer, for that matter — right now? Technically, both still belonged to other Players now. Would they just fail to activate?

Irrelevant, anyway. I simply didn’t have enough karma to use either.

The rejected Guide Avatar shrank, as if consumed by a powerful flame, then disappeared.

Good. Next one!

Would you like to renounce the Divine Avatar: Reaper?
Would you like to renounce the Divine Avatar: Conqueror?
Would you like to renounce the Divine Avatar: Destroyer?
Would you like to renounce the Divine Avatar: Savior?

When I reached the last Avatar on the list, I hesitated but briefly. The way I saw it, it wasn't me who'd given it to Sergei — because that would have created another temporal paradox. This Avatar must have been a gift from the Game, but why would it have done it? What for? To reward me for my act of self-sacrifice? But other Choruls did the same thing — even though they hardly had to murder themselves in the process.

Another thing: where had my time rewind ability come from? I'd never found a satisfying answer to that one. Could it be this final time-travel stint that formed the closed time vortex, creating the Player known as Serge? No one to ask, really.

Also, the Sergey who was now scrambling down the foundation pit didn't look inclined to discuss the finer aspects of the Game's morphology.

He was afraid. He was only human. A weak commoner.

Not for much longer now.

I turned around, looking for a sharp rock on the ground. Having found one, I stepped aside, purposefully turning out my foot at an awkward angle. There. That should work.

"Hey, what's going on, dude? Don't make me do something I'll regret."

I cast a look at my robes. They should take another two hours to disappear because I wasn't the one who'd summoned them. Not a problem.

Sergei wasn’t going to notice it straight away. And they’d disappear by next morning, anyway.

Oh well. Looked like it was over.

“Man, get away from the kid.”

I reached out and cast a regular *Telekinesis*. Not the combat kind which might do Sergei some serious damage. Even so, he flew several yards, landing on top of his bulging shopping bag.

He grunted, trying to scramble back to his feet. For a moment, I even thought I’d overdone it.

Now the hardest part. I had to open up to his return blow.

My arms tensed as my body struggled, wishing to shield itself. So I closed my eyes.

A jet of flames singed my face, its tongues licking the edges of my cloak. Then came a blow.

Not even a blow, really. Compared to some whacks I’d received from Hunter in our training days, this was nothing. Still, I’d positioned myself correctly, to ensure that even the slightest shove could send me on my back.

With a nauseating crunch, my head connected with the rock.

I felt warmth reaching under the back of my neck. The voices above me grew distant, as if coming from another world.

Above me, the star-studded black sheet of a cloudless sky stretched from one horizon to the other. My mind was reaching desperately for it, impatient to reunite with it.

This had been a good day. The right kind of day. And a good month. A bit tough sometimes, but good nevertheless.

This had been a good life. A bit short, maybe.

I closed my eyes and died.

The End

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About the Author

A passionate reader since childhood, Dmitry Bilik loved nothing better than to create worlds of his own. He devoured classical sci fi and fantasy - so no wonder that by his early teens, he'd begun writing his own stories.

His path to authorhood, however, proved windier than he'd imagined. Dmitry graduated from college and went on to study at university. Then he got married. All those years, he treated writing as a hobby - as his own way to escape reality. Only ten years after he'd first put pen to paper, Dmitry started publishing his writing on the Internet, experimenting with a number of genres.

Today, *Interworld Network* is Dmitry's most popular series, combining the best of LitRPG and urban fantasy.

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[i] Solyanka soup, buckwheat and liver, fruit jelly: traditional Russian peasant foods, used here to show Bumpkin's village roots and love for old-world traditions.

[ii] 6,000 rubles = about $ 80

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